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The rationales of practices in executive search - A discourse analytic perspective

International Business

Master's thesis

Lauri Peltonen

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Department of Management and International Business
Aalto University
School of Business

Aalto University
School of Business

Aalto University, P.O. BOX 11000, 00076 AALTO
www.aalto.fi

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Author Lauri Peltonen

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how executive search consultants make sense of the features and motives of their work practices. The study focuses on assessing the meanings attributed to the practices in the consultants' discourse.

The research material comprises of the interview accounts of five executive search consultants, primarily active in the German and the Nordic labour markets, on their work in executive recruitment. A critical discourse analytic methodology is applied to the accounts in order to connect linguistic analysis with theory on social practices.

As a result of the analysis, four distinctive discourses, signifying specific ways of talking and reasoning about practices, were identified as characteristic for the executive search consultants included in the research sample. The consultants' efforts in mediating between their clients and prospective job candidates, realising established executive search processes, offering critical and principled recruitment advisory, and providing strategic input on recruitment practices could be indicated as general themes on the features of practices in the respective discourses. In addition, the discourses, denoted as "entrepreneurial", "functional", "professional" and "conceptual" with the aim of reflecting their typical characteristics, point towards that the consultants attribute a variety of motives to their work practices, among others including fairly pragmatic, technical, ethical and theoretical considerations respectively.

The discourses were generally found to be complementary to one another, representing a range of ways for making sense of the features and motives of practices in executive search. However, some contradictions between them were also noted. This could be seen to reflect both diversity and tensions in the ways in which the executive search consultants relate to their work practices.

Keywords Executive search, executive recruitment, practices, rationalisation, critical discourse analysis, Germany, international human resource management

Aalto-yliopisto
Kauppakorkeakoulu

Aalto-yliopisto, PL 11000, 00076 AALTO
www.aalto.fi

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Tiivistelmä

Tutkielman tavoitteena on selvittää, millaisia käsityksiä suorahakukonsulteilla on työkäytäntöjensä ominaisuuksista ja motiiveista. Tutkielma keskittyy arvioimaan käytäntöihin liitettyjä merkityksiä konsulttien diskurssissa.

Tutkimusaineisto koostuu viiden, ensisijaisesti Saksan ja Pohjoismaiden työmarkkinoilla toimivan suorahakukonsultin kanssa tehdyistä haastatteluista heidän työstään johdon rekrytoinnissa. Tutkimus soveltaa aineistoon kriittisen diskurssianalyysin metodologiaa lingvistisen analyysin yhdistämiseksi teoriaan sosiaalisista käytännöistä.

Analyysin tuloksena tutkimusotokseen sisältyville johdon suorahakukonsulteille voitiin identifioida tyypillisiksi neljä yksilöllistä diskurssia, jotka ilmentävät spesifisiä tapoja puhua käytännöistä ja käsittää niitä. Konsulttien pyrkimykset toimia välittäjinä asiakkaidensa ja ajateltujen työnhakijoiden välillä, vakiintuneiden suorahakuprosessien toteuttaminen, kriittisen ja periaatteellisen rekrytointineuvonannon tarjoaminen ja rekrytointikäytäntöjä koskevan strategisen panoksen antaminen voitiin osoittaa käytäntöjen ominaisuuksiin liittyviksi yleisiksi aiheiksi kussakin diskurssissa. Diskurssit, joita luonnehdittiin ”yrittäjämäiseksi”, ”funktionaaliseksi”, ”ammattimaiseksi”, ja ”käsitteelliseksi” tavoitteena heijastaa niiden tyypillisiä piirteitä, viittaavat lisäksi siihen, että konsultit liittävät työkäytäntöihinsä erinäisiä motiiveja, joihin sisältyy muun muassa melko pragmaattisia, teknisiä, eettisiä ja teoreettisia näkökohtia.

Diskurssien havaittiin yleisesti ottaen täydentävän toisiaan, antaen osviittaa tietystä kirjosta suorahaun käytäntöjen ominaisuuksiin ja motiiveihin liittyvissä käsityksissä. Toisaalta niiden välillä havaittiin myös joitakin ristiriitoja. Tämän voitaisiin nähdä heijastavan sekä moninaisuutta että jännitteitä suorahakukonsulttien tavoissa käsitellä työkäytäntöjään.

Avainsanat Suorahaku, johdon rekrytointi, käytännöt, rationalisointi, kriittinen diskurssianalyysi, Saksa, kansainvälinen henkilöstöjohtaminen

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1 Introduction

What makes a successful professional career? What will be on the CV of a successful individual in a particular job position? These are personal questions and there will be countless answers. People look for opportunities and find them in different places and forms. In other words, it is in many cases far from clear how successful careers are made, and most determinants of career mobility on labour markets can be abstracted only in fairly rough terms. Some things, such as aggregate macroeconomic factors on employment and the general employment conditions on labour markets, are well documented and actively debated in public. Online and print media job boards are also among the most visible tokens of career mobility. However, when considering the personal employment decisions underlying any job placement done by potential employees and employers, several more subtle drivers will as a rule come into play.

A particular driving force in this is often made up of so-called labour market intermediaries, employment and recruiting agencies and consultancies of different appearances. Out of such labour market intermediaries, executive search consultants, also called headhunters, are perhaps the most renowned ones, in particular with regards to senior placements. The consultants essentially seek out, evaluate and nominate candidates for senior and specialist job placements. In one account, it is claimed that globally more than a third of managers making more than USD 100,000, and three quarters of the highest profile CEOs have been nominated by headhunters (McCool 2008, 17). In Finland, about 80 % of the top executives of major corporations are supposedly recruited by means of executive search, whereas the ratio for middle management and specialist positions is to lie at about 40 % (Keronen 2008, 48). A further, and more concrete, indication of the impact of headhunting is that the amount of European offices of the leading international executive search firms has increased from 49 in 1980 to 870 in 2006 (Beaverstock et al. 2007, 2). Moreover, the overall global turnover of the industry is supposed to have grown from USD 2 billion in 1983 to USD 10.4 billion in 2011 (AESC 2012a, 2).

In other words, more often than not, headhunters will have a say as to a successful career. To get at an important dynamic for career progression on the labour market, it could thus be argued that looking to the practices of executive search, and in particular the rationales of practitioners in the field, would be a reasonable line of inquiry – what are they doing, and why?

There have essentially been two main areas of research addressing executive search, one rooted in economics and the other in sociology and management studies. In the economic accounts, the labour market intermediation of executive search firms is largely regarded a matter of ameliorating the problems of overabundant or asymmetric information, and failures in the coordination and collective action between labour supply and demand (Autor 2009, 21). Executive search firms, specialised in senior and specialist recruitment, are in other words deemed to be able to conduct more comprehensive and efficient candidate searches than employers could do on their own (Bull et al. 1987, S11-12).

In the sociological and management studies accounts, the labour market intermediation by executive search firms is characterised in more specific terms as a social relationship between job applicants, headhunters and hiring managers. The need for middlemen is, among others, and in particular for senior job matching, seen to stem from a small number of recruiting companies and candidates participating openly on the job market, high risk to parties that do participate, and reservations as to the legitimacy of job changes (Khurana 2002, 27). Such a market constellation is perceived to grant the intermediating executive search firms an influential position, which is particularly evident in terms of labour management, as the relationships of trust and interests between client companies and search firms are consolidated over time, as well as in the labour market as such, as search firms influence candidates' access to job positions (Faulconbridge et al. 2009, 803-4). Moreover, search firms are seen to turn to specific discursive strategies to gain professional legitimacy as recruiting specialists (Beaverstock et al. 2010, 840).

Several of the academic, additional business press and even fictional contributions offer rather critical standpoints on the business. For example, in his book on US executive search practices, Harvard Professor Rakesh Khurana describes it as "an

insiders' game" (Khurana 2002, xii), where the role of consultants, rather than being impartial market intermediaries, is purportedly that of "master of ceremonies or diplomat" (Ibid., 25). Moreover, in their study of UK and Continental European search practices, the economic geographers Faulconbridge et al. (2009, 806) draw the conclusion that headhunters are to have created a "new boys network" on top of the more traditional "old boys network". In the business press, an article in *BusinessWeek* on executive search for CEOs for instance critiques that "there's no inner sanctum more controlled by elder white males" (Crockett 2006). Also, in a *Spiegel Online* article, "The dirty tricks of headhunters" (Stehr 2011, my translation), is explicitly specified as the topic under investigation, whereas a *Handelsblatt* article is featured with the title "Always trouble with the headhunters" (Terpitz 2013, my translation).

Jo Nesbø's crime novel "*Hodejegerne*" (in English, "Headhunters") provides an additional and rather particular point of view on headhunting. The novel's main character, Roger Brown, is an executive search consultant, and is not only business-like in the extreme, but also has a special interest in the Oslo art gallery scene. Brown is effective, but also sophisticated, and has the reputation of being foremost in the business, something of which he is also plain about – he is "the king of the hill", his "recommendation is the client's decision", and he has "never made a recommendation that the client hasn't followed" (Nesbø 2011, 19; 28, my translations). Moreover, in the midst of a series of murders and deceptions in the course of a managing director search process, Brown, at gun point, considers his motives: "I nominate the candidate I believe the client will hire, and that candidate isn't necessarily the one I believe is best for the company" (Ibid., 202, my translation). Roger Brown, hardened and brilliant, is, of course, a caricature of an executive search consultant. Nevertheless, his remark on his professional motives resonates somewhat with the above criticisms. A rather bleak and obscure picture of the business is apparent in this.

1.1 Research gap and problem

The economic, social, and critical accounts provide many insights on the significance and workings of executive search. In particular, previous social analyses offer several wide-ranging, and at times also incisive, conclusions regarding the characteristics of

the executive search field as a whole. As such, the structure of the field, in view of its institutional constraints and social relations, has expressly been of most interest in these analyses (e.g. Faulconbridge et al. 2009; Hall et al. 2009; Khurana 2002). Individual agency, concerning the rationales of deliberate actions, has meanwhile received only very limited attention, as the analyses have been intent on more general, or higher-order, social theories. Thus, although previous studies have accounted for several notable practices in the field, the ways in which practitioners themselves relate to them in their local contexts have not been much elaborated on. Instead, to obtain explicit information about the practices of executive search consultants themselves, one is essentially dependent on general handbooks on the field (e.g. Brown & Swain 2009; Hofmann & Steppan 2011; Jenn 2005; Nehring & Schraaf 2009). Previous analyses do in other words not appear to provide a very detailed picture of the range of efforts and motivations of practitioners. This could be indicated as a gap in the research.

This gap can be argued to entail some problems. While the general dynamic, which executive search consultants bring to labour markets, has been evaluated in previous studies, the logics of practitioners in their daily work activities remain largely unspecified. How do they make sense of their work? To what extent are specific practices relevant to them? In striving to address these questions arising from the perceived research gap, this study will focus on the research objectives considered below.

1.2 Research objectives and questions

Based on the above-stated research gap, the research objectives in this study are to:

1. Review previous literature on practices in executive search
2. Outline an analytical approach for examining how executive search consultants conceive of their work practices
3. Analyse and assess the main features and motives of the consultants' practices

The study will rely on established theoretical and methodological literature in achieving objectives 1 and 2. In order to achieve objective 3, the study will draw from a research material based on the discourse of executive search consultants on their work. Moreover, the study strives to provide an answer to the following research question, which is further divided into two sub-questions:

How do executive search consultants make sense of their work practices?

a. How are the features of the practices represented?
b. Which motives are attributed to the practices?

For the purpose of providing an answer to the research question, the study will apply a linguistic methodology on the research material comprising of the interview accounts of five executive search consultants on their work activities in retained executive search. Specifically, the methodology is based on critical discourse analysis, a central premise of which is to connect critical linguistic analysis with social theory (Wodak 2001a, 2-3). That is, the methodology studies language use as a socially conditioned phenomenon.

In terms of analytical distinctions, the study is concerned with the critical examination of meanings attributed to the features and motives of practices of executive search in the practitioners' discourses. In this sense, a discourse is essentially viewed as a specific "representation" of a social practice (Fairclough 2003, 206). The key concept of "discourse" is briefly defined as a specific and coherent way of meaningfully framing social reality in language (Fairclough et al. 2011, 357), whereas the concept of "social practice" is denoted as a routinised type of behaviour consisting of specific dispositions on acting and reasoning (Reckwitz 2002, 249).

1.3 Limitations

The research material is a local sample of practitioners from within one office, and the analysis will only account for what the five respondents bring forward in the interview situation. The potential relation of the findings to the executive search field at large will only be generally considered in the subsequent discussion. Also, in

examining the input on practices, the study will draw from specific concepts in sociology for making analytical distinctions. Moreover, as the respondents in question are based and for the most part active in Germany, the German market for executive search will be particularly noted in the literature review. The research material and the analytical limitations of the study will be considered in more detail in Chapter 4 on methodology and Chapter 6 on discussion respectively.

1.4 Structure

The study is made up of seven chapters. In the current Chapter 1, the backgrounds and aims of the study have been introduced. It should be noted that contextual factors play a particularly important part in critical discourse analyses, as the meanings of discourses are dependent on their respective contexts (Wodak 2001a, 2-3). As such, a specific striving in Chapter 2 has been to collect references for understanding the general context of executive search practitioners' points of view. The chapter provides both a general overview of the executive search field, primarily with regards to key concepts, historical developments and industry characteristics, and a review of previous research on practices in executive search. In Chapter 3, a theoretical framework for analysing the research material is outlined. The framework comprises of both linguistic and social theory, especially noting the ways in which the two interrelate. Chapter 4 describes the research methodology. It explains how the discourse analysis has been realised, and accounts for the research material and the specific research process. The findings of the analysis are laid out in Chapter 5. Finally, Chapter 6 summarises the main results of the analysis, considers them in the light of previous literature, and suggests directions for further research.

2 Literature review on executive search

In this chapter, the previous literature on executive search is addressed. First, a general overview of executive search, concerning central concepts, developments and characteristics of the field, will be outlined. Second, a review of previous academic research will follow. Finally, a summary and assessment on how the features and motives of practices in executive search have been laid out in previous literature is presented.

2.1 The executive search business

Executive search denotes the external recruitment of senior personnel usually conducted by a consultant mandated by a client organisation (Jenn 2005, 1-2). As implied by the aggressive connotations in the term "headhunter", it is a proactive means of recruitment, entailing direct and personal approaches of prospective candidates for senior job openings instead of public advertisement. Direct search is, however, at times also coupled with a selection service, which entails identifying candidates applying based on a public advertisement. Executive search is moreover a retained form of recruitment, i.e. consultants are paid part of their fee, a retainer, in advance for the services to be provided. This is done regardless of the eventual recruitment outcome. The total fee, which is often paid incrementally during the provision of the search services, commonly amounts to one third of the hired candidate's first year salary plus operating expenses incurred during the search (Ibid., 2; Khurana 2002, 135).

Retained executive search is to be discerned from other forms of external recruitment, such as contingency recruitment, in which a hiring company compensates recruiters only upon a successful placement (Finlay & Coverdill 2007, 4). Contingency headhunting agencies tend to be small and medium sized local enterprises, focusing on low- to mid-level placements. They are most prevalent in the US, comprising about half of the search market (Jenn 2005, 2), and more uncommon in Europe – they e.g. have a 5 % market share in Germany (BDU 2011a, 9). Retained search firms, on

the contrary, are commonly either large, global firms, or small and specialised local "boutique" firms focusing on a select niche practice (Jenn 2005, 11), and differentiated by a focus on senior placements (Hall et al. 2009, 405).

Generally, the placements fulfilled by means of executive search range from specialists and mid- and top-level managers to corporate board members. The salary range for job positions in search assignments is broad. In the US, the typical annual base salary may range from USD 100,000 – 150,000 and upward, the latter especially in an international context (Jenn 2005, 2; Finlay & Coverdill 2007, 4). In Germany, the large, international search firms mostly recruit for positions in the EUR 150,000 to EUR 250,000 annual salary range, whereas mid-sized and small firms more commonly search in the EUR 75,000 to EUR 100,000 range (BDU 2011a, 10).

The formal search process used by firms generally follows a recognised set of steps (AESC 2012b; BDU 2011b; FEX 2012a). These are roughly as follows:

1) Client acquisition followed by contracting and mandating
2) Drafting a job specification and a target list of companies to be researched and those that are off-limits in cooperation with the client
3) Screening internal and online databases, various industry resources, and the targeted companies for potential job candidates
4) Approaching the identified, potential candidates and persuading them of the job position at hand
5) Drafting a "long" list of initially interested candidates for the client's feedback
6) Interviewing the interested candidates and including the most promising ones on a "short" list along with evaluation reports to be presented to the client
7) Arranging for short-listed candidates to meet and negotiate with the client
8) Reference checks with the final, selected candidate's former associates
9) Orientation of the hired candidate and the client for a sustainable working relationship
10) Follow-up on the hired candidate's integration into the client organisation

The above process may be more or less comprehensive depending on a job position's hierarchical level, as e.g. hiring a senior manager requires other priorities as that of a

functional specialist. Also, as a rule, consultants execute the process in cooperation with a research team (Jenn 2005, 3-4; Nehring & Schraaf 2009, 40). As such, two basic roles are discernible in executive search: that of a researcher, engaged in market research and candidate identification, and that of a consultant, engaged in interacting with clients and candidates. Search processes are furthermore accompanied by a set of guarantees offered to clients by the executive search firms. Among the most prevalent ones are off-limits rules, i.e. that headhunters promise not to approach the hired candidate or other individuals at a client company for the assignments of other clients, pledges to continue searches until a client company is satisfied, and to replace hired candidates if they leave within a specified time period (Britton & Ball 1999, 144).

The description of "The Classic Search" in the US by Kenny (1978, 80-82), writing on the topic "Executive Search Today", is highly reminiscent of the above, formal search process. The set of procedural steps thus seem to have remained essentially unchanged over time and to have become fairly standardised. Indeed, as Khurana (2002, 136) argues, the processes employed by executive search firms are to a large extent indistinguishable from one another. This is also roughly the case regardless of the firms' countries of origin, as Britton et al. (1997, 229) suggest. In their study on French, German and British firms, the search practices and the guarantees offered to clients are indeed found to be very similar. Some indications of how the executive search field has attained these features and its contemporary form more generally are provided in the following.

2.1.1 A brief history

In this subsection, the historical backgrounds of the executive search field are considered. Firstly, a look at economic developments, with particular focus on organisational forms and managerial hierarchies, will be taken. Secondly, societal developments, with particular focus on career conceptions and labour markets, will be presented. Thirdly, the emergence of executive search firms themselves is addressed.

Economic origins

The origins of executive search are closely coupled with those of other professional services emerging in the US during mid-20th century and somewhat later in Europe (Jenn 2005, 4-6). These fields emerged against the backdrop of wider economic developments at the time, as increasing demand for support and advice in tasks beyond companies' own competencies arose. In terms of executive search, the concurrent changes in organisational hierarchies could be argued to be of particular note.

Propelled by rapid economic growth-rates, wide-ranging technological applications, internationalisation, and material welfare in mass markets, the organisational sophistication of economies became more marked (Cameron 1993, 377-79). These factors further exacerbated the complexity and coordination challenges, which first had become pressing in late 19th and early 20th century multiunit corporations, and compelled organisations to delegate control and develop professional management further to handle the boom in manufacturing and distribution (Chandler 1977, 484-86). The role of management in the eyes of corporate stakeholders is consequently to have been depoliticised and legitimised in this process of "managerial revolution", as corporate administration was put forward as a technical engineering science rather than a device for organisational politics (Dobbin 2005, 33).

In addition to this functional narrative centred on notions of economic efficiency, organisational politics and culture are moreover notable factors in explaining the development of managerial hierarchies (Du Boff & Herman 1980, 92). As Du Boff & Herman (Ibid., 91) underline, "the struggle for market control may have been at least as important as any quest for efficiency [in administrative coordination]". Thus, although managers' growing independence vis-à-vis other stakeholders is to have enabled investment in long-term efficiency, it likewise enabled the exploitation and consolidation of managements' role. According to Baker & Smith (1998, 15-22), managers generally came to allocate more means for their own benefit, leading to a growing tier of professional managers, and were eventually, especially in the 1960s and the 1970s, inclined to building diversified corporate groups made up of many unrelated businesses, in pursuit of alleged organisational synergies. Above all in the

1980s, these so-called conglomerate groups became beset by rigidities to a precarious degree and managerial opportunism a widely publicised and politicised problem. Thus, management became more directly accountable for corporate performance than previously (Khurana 2002, 59-61). These developments in the institutional environment are to have gone a long way to question corporate management's formerly relatively undisputed hegemony over corporate control, also resulting in increasing turnover in managerial hierarchies and thus increasingly putting managerial recruitment on the corporate agenda. As will be outlined in the following, these developments can moreover be seen as closely related to wider societal factors.

Societal origins

In his 1893 work on "*The Division of Labor in Society*", Émile Durkheim is to have argued that labour organisation develops interdependently with the economic sophistication of a society, increasing in complexity with higher degrees of economic sophistication (Smelser & Swedberg 2005, 10). In other words, the division of labour may not only be thought of as an economic phenomenon revolving around efficiency, as above, but also as a social one, as it integrates society by coordinating specialised activities. In particular, as labour has increased in specialisation, the attribution to occupational groups is to have become a predominant integrative force in society (Dobbin 2005, 40-41)

The ways in which complexity in labour organisation manifests itself are too numerous to be covered here. A crucial question, however, is to which extent labour division really has such an integrative effect as modernist accounts, such as that of Durkheim, might lead one to believe. Indeed, a counterpoint may be found with Max Weber ([1905] 1950, 182), who reflects on the potential consequences of modernisation of society as follows: "For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: 'Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved'."

Out of specific reasons for disintegration, one could perhaps note processes of societal "differentiation" and "rationalisation" (van der Loo & van Reijen 1992, 30), which can be viewed as central elements to the modern condition. Differentiation (van der

Loo & van Reijen 1992, 31; 35) signifies the functional dispersal and specialisation within social structures, e.g. a company. Consequently, linkages between actors, such as work colleagues, become weaker, although wider interdependencies grow – i.e. people may not work together as intimately as in less differentiated forms of organisation, but become more dependent of the efforts of ever more, relatively far-removed people. Typical for this is that societal ascription, i.e. the importance of belonging to a certain group, abates, whereas individual achievement is emphasised. As such, meritocracy and personal advancement is accentuated with the potential downside of disintegration, as incentives for solidarity with a wider collective decline.

Rationalisation (Ibid., 31; 36), i.e. a propensity for simplification and systematisation of reality, may further support disintegration, as actors come to define reality on their own, potentially limited terms. As a consequence of such optimisation, actors can lose sight of the realities of others, e.g. people in different organisational functions, although systematisation may also to a degree further common understanding in generalised terms, e.g. in shared methods.

On a similarly postmodern note, Bauman (2005, 375) asserts that employment relationships have indeed changed much in terms of integrating a specialised workforce. Jobs are deemed to be more egalitarian, empowered and short-term, however with the following feature:

> "Now it is the duty – the must – of the would-be subordinates to catch the eye of their would-be bosses and arouse their desire to purchase the services which in the now bygone times the bosses and the supervisors that the bosses hired used to force them to provide." (Ibid.)

Notably, the apparent freedom and openness of "modern" societies and labour markets have come at the cost of decreased structure and, by extension, stability. Reitman & Schneer (2008, 17-19) touch on the above notions in more concrete terms in their description of contemporary career conceptions. In their account, traditional corporate careers for most of the 20th century are to have ideally been steady, life-long commitments to a male-dominated organisation, entailing a gradual advancement in the company's internal hierarchy. However, as of the 1970s, careers gradually

changed character due to female emancipation, a desire for more individual freedom of choice in working life by the post-war generations, as well as large, cyclical lay-offs in many industries rendering the traditional career path moot for many. In more contemporary terms still, changes in career values towards more flexibility, increases in workforce diversity, and demographic change are moreover mentioned among factors particularly influencing the layouts of careers (Ibid., 23-25).

Thus, workplace uncertainties and more idiosyncratic career aspirations are considered to have brought about an increasingly mobile and differentiated professional in a more dynamic and open labour market. In the managerial strata in particular, openness further resulted from the rise of business degrees, such as MBAs, as rationalised, professional credentials. Khurana (2002, 125) concludes that the preference for "home-grown" managers diminished as a consequence and that corporate employment relations thus became "characterized by a new class of mobile managers willing and able to move from one firm to another for the sake of promotions and raises". Meyer & Rowan (1977, 344) further underline the changing institutional setting in that the discipline of psychology made personnel selection a rational science to be carried out by personnel professionals. Personnel departments and various HR agencies – executive search firms among them – proliferated as a consequence.

Technologically, the internet, the adoption rates of which have risen dramatically since the 1990s, has arguably played a key role in these developments as well, and labour markets have been extensively remodelled as a consequence. As Autor (2001, 2-3) outlines, the internet has resulted in more frequent and intensive matching of employers and employees. With the rise of professional social networking sites, such as LinkedIn and XING, this has become even more marked. However, there is a marked downside of adverse selection, as it has become easier for people to more uncritically apply for many jobs, even ones they may be relatively unqualified for (Ibid., 9). This has lessened the signal of candidate self-appraisal, since online applications may be more superficial and tentative, resulting in employers incurring more costs for screening. Moreover, although CVs and most information on candidates has become ever more available, some information has not. Regulations on employment, out of concerns to maintain privacy and prevent discrimination, have

meant that employers are not allowed to pose many personal questions to candidates (Khurana 2002, 124). Also, in many cases, information has become overabundant with significant screening costs arising consequently. Concluding on these developments, Autor (2009, 21) points out that the decentralisation of the labour market in the era of increasingly rapid information flows has fuelled "demand for institutions that can variously compel disclosure of hidden information, coordinate the actions of members of a congested market, or solve collective action failures among parties with complementary interests".

The expansion of executive search firms

Within the development of professional services industries to support corporations in newfound managerial challenges, executive search first became prominent under the auspices of US management consultancies, in particular McKinsey and Booz Allen Hamilton, and major accounting firms, in particular what would become KPMG and PricewaterhouseCoopers (Jenn 2005, 5). However, as Jenn points out, most search practices within these firms eventually ceased their activities due to conflicts of interest between different parts of the businesses, e.g. management consultancies advising on organisational changes, while also taking care of staffing needs arising from such. Also, the fact that many prominent companies became the clientele of the booming management consultancies and auditing firms made these companies off-limits, in keeping with guarantees offered to clients, for simultaneous headhunting. As a result of this diminishing of potential target companies, many search consultants are to have broken away from their mother companies. Accordingly, founders of prominent international executive search firms in the US, Boyden (est. 1946), Heidrick & Struggles (est. 1953), Spencer Stuart (est. 1956), Amrop (est. 1967), as well as Korn/Ferry (est. 1969) and Russell Reynolds (est. 1969), had a background in these professional services firms (Ibid.).

In the wake of increasing inter-Atlantic trade and demand from internationalising American corporations, most of the pioneering US search firms entered the UK and the continental European market in the 1960s, the first of them being Spencer Stuart in 1961 (Hall et al. 2009, 405). Search firms of UK and continental European origin followed shortly, such as Swiss Egon Zehnder, the most prominent European search

firm today, founded by a former Spencer Stuart consultant in 1964, and especially in the 1970s (Jenn 2005, 5-6). Kienbaum, today the German market leader in executive search, relatedly separated its emerging line of placement services, which were largely a by-product of management consulting activities, to a business of its own in 1978 (Kienbaum 2012a). In Europe, regional integration in the 1990s brought about ever-greater demand for cross-border recruitment (Britton et al. 1997, 222). Indeed, in their datasheet on the amount of European offices of major international search firms, Beaverstock et al. (2005) claim they had altogether 50 in 1980, 104 in 1990, 471 in 2000, and up to 871 in 2006. The largest search firms eventually expanded to emerging markets in Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe in the footsteps of their multinational client companies, whereas some of the smaller ones have formed more or less integrated international networks (AESC 2009, 8-10)

As is plain from the above expansion figures, from having been a relatively obscure and marginal feature of corporate recruitment, the executive search industry came to reach a more mainstream status in the 1980s and 1990s. The AESC (2009, 7) highlight the media coverage that executive search processes at several prominent companies, such as IBM and Coca Cola, received at the time. This resulted in increased public awareness and the realisation that executive search was a service to reckon with, as renowned corporations acknowledged consultants' efforts. In time, executive search became a relatively regular topic to journalists and analyses on the industry more commonplace (Ibid.).

In conclusion, the above overview can be seen to suggest a number of more or less parallel historical developments as underlying the emergence of the executive search field. Several economic, societal, technological and geographical factors could be noted in enabling the institutional environment, above all in terms of supply and demand conditions on labour markets, for the labour market intermediation of executive search firms. Some more specific features as to the characteristics of these conditions in their contemporary form will be elaborated on in the following.

2.1.2 Industry structure and characteristics

Supply and demand in executive search services

As suggested above, many reasons can be seen to have prescribed a growing demand for executive search services. Often cited reasons for companies to entrust consultants with finding candidates in contemporary terms include:

- The scarcity of specialised labour and competent executives on labour markets
- Attracting candidates from competitors and passive candidates not currently on the labour market
- Maintaining the confidentiality of placements both internally within the recruiting company and externally vis-à-vis e.g. competitors
- Clients' poor reputation and/or location
- Clients' failure to fill positions by other means, such as advertising, job agencies, and personal contacts

  (Brown & Swain 2009, 229; Nehring & Schraaf 2009, 37-38)

Furthermore, in his analysis of the labour market segment for CEOs in the US, Khurana (2002, 30-35) among others highlights the lack of exchange forums at which knowledge of the labour market parties' complementary interests could be established in confidence as prompting intermediation by search firms. The associated risks to the parties, e.g. for potential candidates at their current companies or for client companies' boards if a replacement for a senior executive is being sought, following the untimely disclosure of recruitment processes are also noted with regards to the condition of confidentiality.

Faulconbridge et al. (2009, 804) accordingly underline the advantages that consultants contribute with as compared to clients' own recruitment efforts in terms of the comprehensiveness and efficiency in candidate screening, the confidentiality and accountability of search practices, as well as consultants' superior skill, expertise and experience in identifying and attracting talent. Consultants specialise at finding talent, whereas "[…] both existing executives but also human resource departments cannot

manage the task effectively" (Ibid.). Also highlighted are corporate governance issues, such as concerns about favouritism, as a factor behind the seeming necessity of search consultants as "risk-management agents" to minimise risks associated with recruiting executives.

Although the reasons behind demand to hire executive search consultants are seemingly manifold and widely acknowledged, it is characterised by much volatility. In keeping with several other service industries, the search business is very sensitive to the state of the economy. For example, among others following the implosion of the IT-bubble in the early 2000s, the global market for executive search diminished from USD 8.3 billion to USD 5.3 billion between 2000 and 2003 (AESC 2012a, 2), i.e. it contracted by over a third. This led to considerable redundancies and cutbacks in the industry (Jenn 2005, 7-8). However, the global demand for search services rebounded between the years 2004 and 2008, more or less doubling to reach USD 11 billion (AESC 2012a, 2). The year 2009, marked by the financial crisis, entailed a 33 % decline in revenues. This was followed by a 29 % recovery the next year and further 9 % growth in 2011 (Ibid.).

Meanwhile, on a country level, according to figures by BDU (2009, 2; 2011a, 2), the German market for executive search shrank from EUR 1.270 billion to EUR 760 million between 2000 and 2003, which amounts to a 40 % drop in market turnover, and a level lower than the pre-boom EUR 790 million in 1998. The market recovered steadily in the next five years, growing on average 14.5 % annually to reach EUR 1.490 billion in 2008. The year 2009 experienced a 26.4 % drop in turnover, whereas an increase of 18.2 % followed in 2010. As these industry figures indicate, executive search firms have had to come to terms with a highly volatile market.

A particular example of the fluctuations in demand is fairly evident in CEO turnover figures, which may of course only partially reflect on demand for executive search as a whole. In a study comprising the world's 2,500 largest public companies, Favaro et al. (2012, 9) show that 14.2 % appointed a new CEO in 2011, whereas the figure was 11.6 % in 2010. In general, their data from the past 12 years suggests that CEO turnover is typically lower in a struggling economy and higher in upswings – it was e.g. 9.8 % in 2003, and up by over a half at 15.4 % two years later. Perhaps most

interestingly for European headhunters, in 2011, 31 % of new CEOs in Western Europe were external recruits, i.e. coming from outside the company, up from 14 % in 2007 (Ibid., 17).

Britton et al. (1997, 221) touch on some of the determinants within client firms leading to declines in demand for external recruitment. Being pressed for cash in economic downturns, companies may rather reduce than grow their workforce and also resort to keeping recruitment activities in-house at personnel departments rather than outsourcing them to consultants. Moreover, executives who are in employment during a recession are deemed more reluctant to change jobs than in stable economic times because of the added general uncertainty to what is already often a challenging career move. This lessens the cumulative demand for search services, which follows from a succession of managers switching between companies.

Industry structure and strategies

Executive search markets tend to be dispersed. For instance, the two foremost firms in the German search market have approximately a 5 % share of total market turnover each, whereas the third largest has 2.5 % and the fourth around 2 % (BDU 2011a, 3). The Finnish market is similarly scattered between several firms, mostly with no more than a 4 % market share each (FEX 2012b). An important reason for the dispersion can be seen in the off-limits guarantees offered to clients, which decrease the size of candidate pools in deterring consultants from approaching potentially interesting people at other client companies (McCool 2008, 164-65). This fact may put limits on a search firm's size if it is to maintain access to an adequate selection of target companies with prospective candidates.

Britton et al. (1997, 225) see a related factor limiting firms' sizes in what they label "splintering". This entails consultants leaving a search firm upon it having reached a mature size, and taking their clients with them to found a business of their own. Among others as a consequence of the relatively uniform formal search processes, the lack of regulatory bodies controlling the number of practitioners or their educational prerequisites, and low overhead costs, entry barriers for new firms are furthermore characterised as seemingly low (Ibid.). However, it is also noteworthy that industry

incumbents have a considerable barrier to exiting the business, as consultants having worked for a long time in executive search do not easily move to other fields of employment (Ibid., 229).

Following from the above, search firms appear to often be rather small and may only have limited market power. And as is fairly plain from the above demand figures, executive search firms are beset by rapid and recurring fluctuations in revenues. This may be assumed to be testing on firms' adaptability and competitiveness. A number of strategies have essentially been pursued towards meeting these challenges. Notable ones to be identified in the literature are: 1) market differentiation and segmentation; 2) industry- and function-specific specialisation; 3) service diversification; 4) building and maintaining a professional reputation. These are considered subsequently.

As already mentioned, executive search firms are deemed to be converging towards becoming either large international consultancies with comprehensive resource bases, or specialised "boutique" firms in niche market segments, pursuing market differentiation or segmentation respectively (Jenn 2005, 11). The largest search firms have offices in many notable business locations, whereas several smaller firms have joined forces internationally, forming more or less integrated networks under a single brand name to be able to provide a wider and more comprehensive market reach (AESC 2009, 10).

In terms of specialisation, search consultants commonly focus on either a specific industry or a specific corporate function (Hofmann 2011, 96). Whereas industry-specific expertise refers to knowledge of an entire industry, such as financial services or consumer products, function-specific expertise refers to a company function, such as sales or manufacturing. So-called practice groups are moreover commonly formed for the respective industry or function within the search firm (Jenn 2005, 17).

Diversification is emergent in that many executive search firms have included additional human resources services to their offerings. For example, on the front page of their website, Heidrick & Struggles claim to be "the world's first Leadership Advisory firm, blending executive search & leadership consulting" (Heidrick & Struggles 2012a). Thus, in addition to search practices, services have come to include

management assessment and development activities, among others. This is widely reflected on an overall market level. In Germany, 85.5 % of search firms' total revenues in 2010 were from search and selection activities, pertaining to specialists, managers and corporate board members. Meanwhile, out of other revenue streams, e.g. "management diagnostics" and "management development and management coaching" services accounted for 8.7 % and 2.1 % respectively (BDU 2011a, 7). In Finland, most firms collected somewhat over 80 % of their revenues in search and selection activities in 2009, the rest being made up of assessments and miscellaneous other consulting activities (FEX 2012b).

As with most other service industries, questions often arise with regards to standards in service provision. Due to the difficulty to evaluate the service performance of headhunters, clients may often rely on reputation and recommendations (Britton et al. 1997, 227). Moreover, in particular because of the confidential nature of many search assignments, the professional credibility of a headhunter is a crucial selling proposition. Search firms are indeed known to invest heavily in building and maintaining their image and reputation, among others in terms of being knowledgeable on industry trends and maintaining physical cues such as the appearances of offices and of consultants themselves (Khurana 2002, 130-32). Accordingly, in their 50th anniversary historical overview, the Association of Executive Search Consultants (AESC 2009, 7) brings forward that successful consultants have been characterised by "business savvy" and "first-rate wardrobes", among others.

Out of the largest search firms' main selling points, many revolve around their search methodology, consultative approach, inter-office teamwork, and geographical reach (Khurana 2002, 135). Indeed, at Spencer Stuart: "At their [the researchers'] disposal is our unique, proprietary global database, contributing to the speed and efficiency which clients expect from us" (Spencer Stuart 2012). At Heidrick & Struggles, "methods are based on a thorough understanding of the strategic, financial and operational issues affecting your organization today" (Heidrick & Struggles 2012b). Meanwhile, at Kienbaum, clients' business challenges are met by "a system of integrated Practice Groups with defined focus industries" (Kienbaum 2012b). Finally, at Egon Zehnder "clients engage more than individual consultants; they engage the

entire firm with all of its relevant sources and experts" (Egon Zehnder 2012). In sum, search firms are argued to be providing clients with several advantages. In the following review of previous research on executive search, some of the empirical bases of these claims are examined.

2.2 Previous research on practices in executive search

A review of previous studies on practices in executive search is outlined in this section. As noted in the introductory chapter, there have essentially been two main fields of research addressing the topic. Whereas the literature in economics is comparatively small, research in sociology and management studies has been more plentiful. These strains of literature will be examined in the following.

2.2.1 An economic viewpoint

Within labour economics, the existence of labour market intermediaries, including executive search firms, is largely ascribed to demand for addressing problems of costly search, imperfect and asymmetric market information, or failure of coordination and collective action between labour supply and demand (Autor 2009, 21). Moreover, considering the relationship between executive search consultants and clients in terms of principal-agent theory, concerns about opportunistic behaviour have been touched on as well (Britton & Ball 1999, 139-40).

While framing labour market intermediation in fairly rudimentary terms, Bull et al. (1987) hypothesise that a search firm, while in their theoretical model incurring the same screening costs for establishing candidate fit as employers, have two advantages that set them apart from employers' own search efforts. The first advantage is that search firms can provide insurance against sampling variance (Ibid., S11). This means that whereas employers may only draw from the results of a single market search, executive search firms can draw from the findings of several search assignments done for different companies. In this way, the sampling risk in one assignment can be diversified between several assignments, assuming that candidate pools are

adequately interchangeable. The second advantage is, as a consequence, that search firms can conserve market information between searches and make use of it to enable collective action in subsequent placements more quickly than employers could do on their own (Ibid., S12). In sum, executive search firms are thus deemed to be able to conduct more comprehensive and efficient searches.

However, as technological advances in recent times have made market information significantly more plentiful and less expensive, and as career mobility has become ever more marked, Autor (2009, 21-22) points out that the information and coordination advantages of labour market intermediaries could be assumed to have lessened as a consequence. Nevertheless, he argues that the contrary has been the case. This is due to the overabundance and increased unreliability of market information, as e.g. the signalling value of the formerly costly action of submitting job applications has diminished, frequently making it less conducive for collective action. In this context, the information and coordination advantages of intermediaries appear to remain important.

In the process of intermediating between clients and candidates, search firms are acting on the mandate of the clients. Reflecting on this relationship based on the principal-agent problem, Britton & Ball (1999, 139-40) see a potential conflict of interest between the parties: clients can be assumed to primarily seek a thorough process to find the most suitable individual for a position, whereas consultants may look to maximise search profits. Possible avenues for opportunistic behaviour are to exist for both parties. Firstly, principals may wish to renegotiate assignment terms or terminate assignments altogether, e.g. citing changed recruitment circumstances. Also, principals can more or less inadvertently sabotage search processes by mistreating and consequently deterring candidates from taking part in processes (Khurana 2002, 141), but nevertheless insist on that search firms continue working on the mandate. Secondly, Britton & Ball (1999, 140) see that consultants may put insufficient effort into the assignment, something, which clients can be at pains to observe properly. Due to the intangibility and covertness of the services, assessing the performance of consultants can be challenging.

2.2.2 A social viewpoint

The literatures in sociology and management studies generally examine the executive search field in view of its social relations. As such, the roles of executive search consultants have among others been framed in terms of facilitating social exchanges between job candidates and client companies on the labour market (Khurana 2002, 140). Consultants' positions with regards to market control (Faulconbridge et al. 2009, 807) and professional legitimation (Beaverstock et al. 2010, 841) have moreover featured in the previous research.

The roles of executive search consultants

The intermediary role of executive search consultants on labour markets is characterised as comprising of fulfilling three main functions: consultants coordinate, mediate and legitimate placements (Khurana 2002, 140-50). The aspect of coordination refers to search firms' advantages compared with client firms in managing a search process, which have also already been noted in the economic literature on executive search. Consultants are for instance regarded as adept at screening potentially small or intransparent candidate pools, and may benefit from scale advantages, e.g. in the form of candidate databases, in matching clients and candidates. Moreover, the consultants can work in confidence and provide anonymity, helping to defuse perceived risks to both clients and potential candidates.

This highlights search firms' second main function – mediation – as consultants inform the labour market parties while acting as a buffer between them. A key part of consultants' work lies in overcoming reservations by companies and candidates alike to participating in the job market. As Granovetter (2005, 36) points out, a "bilateral asymmetry" of information exists with both parties holding information that the other needs, and that "employers and employees prefer to learn about one another from personal sources whose information they trust". Khurana (2002, 144) accordingly stresses the importance of "the finely honed interpersonal and diplomatic skills of the search consultants" for bringing parties together in successful search assignments. An example of this can be found with Jürgen Mülder, characterised as a prominent German headhunter of recent decades, who acknowledges that consultants "know a

lot" of "probably embarrassing" facts about the candidates they interview (Steppan 2011, 25, my translations). Beyond clients' confidential information, consultants are in other words also well informed about candidates' private lives, making discretion and sensibility apparent success factors.

Relatedly, Melé & Roig (1995, 135-37), suggest that successful executive search is fundamentally contingent on consultants' fulfilment of ethical criteria, notably the values of "justice", "truthfulness", and "trustworthiness", in their interaction with clients and candidates. By justice they largely refer to respectful and unbiased treatment of the parties in keeping with good faith, whereas truthfulness denotes the striving for thorough and factual assessment of candidates, as well as the reasonable dissemination of information between the parties. Trustworthiness moreover mainly relates to maintaining due processes and principles of confidentiality and discretion in handling the searches.

The above principles can be seen to aid consultants in what Khurana (2002, 147-49) regards as their third main function: legitimation. A key prerequisite for legitimation is the notion of executive search consultants as third parties, essentially distanced from candidates' and clients' interests. This is to make for objectivity and work to alleviate different constituents' concerns about legitimacy. While potential candidates may feel more at ease while talking to an external consultant, clients may justify placements by reference to a methodical recruitment process. In sum, "the mere presence of a third party mediator lends an appearance of distance and objectivity to what might be suspected by outsiders to be an essentially social exchange" (Ibid., 38).

Market influence and control

The roles of executive search consultants outlined above can be regarded as indicative of a certain position of influence on labour markets. In particular, it is argued that there is a "symbiotic, entangled and reproductive relationship between elite labour markets and executive search firms … producing a 'new boys network' that influences elite labour recruitment" (Faulconbridge et al. 2009, 801). Faulconbridge et al. (Ibid.) see these conditions as evident firstly in terms of clients' labour management, as the relationships between client companies and executive search

firms get consolidated over time, and secondly in the labour market itself, as search firms control candidates' access to positions and influence definitions of qualifications.

A number of factors can be seen to underlie consultants' authority to handle clients' labour management, many of which have been addressed previously in discussing the demand for executive search services (see Subsection 2.1.2). An additional feature can, however, be considered in that repeat business is a particularly marked feature in search demand, as previous experience with consultants at a given search firm is often an overriding criterion for giving new assignments (Britton et al. 1992, 240; Khurana 2002, 137). Moreover, Faulconbridge et al. (2009, 803-4) direct their attention to a particular strategy seen in the popular argumentation focusing on managerial talent: its impact on corporate profitability, the shortage of it, as well as the perceived "war" to attain it. As talent is considered to be rare – increasingly so due to demographic change – and the risks associated with poor management pressing, the means to evaluate and attain it is presented as crucial. Examples in line with this argumentation can indeed be found in several sources in the executive search field.

For example, Kenny (1979, 79), a headhunter at Spencer Stuart, argues that low birth rates in the economically afflicted 1930s led to a scarce managerial talent pool in the late 1960s. Another one of his key contentions can be found in that "many industries have just grown too fast for companies to have developed all their key people for succession purposes" (Ibid.). Moreover, Christian (2002), a prominent headhunter during the time of the late nineties' internet boom, propagates remarks, such as "there is always a talent shortage" (Ibid., 5), and "if Jack Welch [Chairman and CEO of General Electric] was obsessed with talent, shouldn't you be, too?" (Ibid., 11).

In more contemporary terms, Fernández-Aráoz (2007), a headhunter at Egon Zehnder, also provides a contribution in line with the discourse in his book on "*Great People Decisions*". Above all, he stands firmly by the advantages of functional specialisation in recruitment: "Choosing investments, diagnosing medical conditions, assessing legal risks, predicting candidates' performances – these are just a few examples of the kinds of things that experts can and should weigh in on." (Ibid., 15) A tendency of hiring managers towards snap judgements is underlined as a major shortcoming in many

recruitments, as "most managers and executives believe they are *very good* at sizing up and choosing people, despite their lack of preparation, experience, and (in many cases) a track record replete with mistakes" (Ibid., 70, emphasis in original). While among others citing people-centred statements by Jim Collins, a prominent management author, and Jack Welch (Ibid., 27-34), he demands more efforts be made to professionalise selection and concludes that "both leading business theorists and those on the front lines agree that great people decisions are the number-one priority for corporate success" (Ibid., 34).

As noted above, in addition to controlling clients' labour management, Faulconbridge et al. (2009, 801) also argue that consultants create a "new boys network" in labour markets by regulating candidates' access to job positions. More specifically, they see that headhunters have a reproductive role in labour markets in that potential candidates need to become known to consultants in one way or another, and that the ways in which this occurs has an inherently restrictive impact on eventual candidate pools. In sum: "The 'model' candidate in contemporary elite labour markets is defined and controlled by researchers and consultants in executive search firms who act as gatekeepers to elite labour networks." (Ibid., 803)

With regards to how a "model candidate" is defined in executive search firms, Khurana (2002, 104-6) claims that perceptions of CEO candidates are to a large extent derived from the reputation and performance of the candidates' previous employers, and that going for candidates from high-status companies makes placements "acceptable", regardless of the candidates' actual performance at said companies. On a similar note, Faulconbridge et al. (2009, 805) talk more broadly about "certain social, cultural and geographical knowledges" as prerequisites for inclusion in headhunters' recruitment networks. Moreover, Coverdill & Finlay (1998) touch on a similar issue in their study on headhunters' practices in employee selection. They contend that apart from assessing "fit" to corporate culture in general, and personal fit to those with whom candidates interview with at companies in particular, headhunters look for "highly specific if not idiosyncratic" (Ibid., 105) skills in candidates. As such, they essentially argue that while the fulfilment of formal job specification requirements determines an initial candidate pool, subsequent attention

is directed towards "hot buttons", i.e. distinctive skills and experiences, which are deemed to convince a particular employer about a new hire (Ibid., 117-18).

Professional legitimation

As seen above, executive search consultants are argued to validate their roles by, among others, citing discourses on talent management and their specialist capabilities in recruitment. Faulconbridge et al. (2009, 805) moreover identify a key argument for the positive impact of consultants in their perceived professionalism, stemming from a "client-service ethos", and the "value-added" in the search services beyond supplying qualified candidates. However, in keeping with their critical tone, the authors regard consultants' discourse of professionalism as a "ploy" to contrast contemporary efforts at executive search with dubious "old boy" practices deemed to lie in the past (Ibid.).

Largely drawing from this standpoint, Beaverstock et al. (2010, 826) develop the notion of the consultants' professionalism further by considering how it has contributed to legitimating their role in recruitment. In contrast to "bounded" professions, such as accounting and law, executive search, as an "unbounded" profession, has largely been lacking an established body of knowledge, as well as widely recognised certifications (Ibid., 825-26). Thus, similarly to management consulting and product management, the "knowledge-base is regarded as too fuzzy, fragmented, indeterminate, perishable and client/context dependent to be formalized into a coherent body of knowledge and portable set of credentials that can sustain traditional processes of occupational closure" (Muzio et al. 2011, 446).

Somewhat differing strategies to gain occupational closure, i.e. to regulate the group of recognised practitioners, have thus been put to work. Beaverstock et al. (2010, 832-40) identify two approaches, based in "political-economy" and in "cultural-economy" respectively. The political-economic strategy is seen to revolve around the formalisation of standards for search practices and the regulation of industry membership, i.e. it is a professionalisation strategy akin to traditional occupational closure. Examples of this can be found in the codes of conduct advocated by professional associations, such as the "Code of conduct for qualified executive search"

of the Federal Association of German Management Consultants (BDU 2011b, my translation), the "Professional practice guidelines" of the Association of Executive Search Consultants (AESC 2012b), or the "Recommendations for good professional practice" of the Finnish Executive Search Firms' Association (FEX 2013).

It has, however, been shown that political-economy approaches have only had a limited impact, adherence to these guidelines mostly being lip service due to the obligations being ethical, not equally applicable to differing institutional contexts, and as no formal qualifications exist (Beaverstock et al. 2010, 833-35). Single firms have instead played an important role in defining the features of professionalism, and the professional identities of executive search practitioners have tended to rather spring from individual firms themselves rather than the wider occupation or associations (Muzio et al. 2011, 448). As Melé & Roig (1995, 135) further point out, part of criticisms towards headhunters often stems from the ambiguity of membership criteria of the profession with some practitioners unable or unwilling to provide ethical guarantees for their activities. The professionalisation of executive search in light of political economy has in other words been marred by many challenges.

The cultural-economic strategy is to have been of greater significance for professionalisation in executive search. Beaverstock et al. (2010, 837-40) highlight two main aspects in this context: 1) discourses to promote executive search practices; and 2) discourses to gain market legitimacy. The first aspect deals with the proliferation of technical know-how on standardised search practices, especially in view of the role played by particularly successful headhunters. Such "iconic individuals", along with "brand leaders", denoting prestigious search firms, are argued to have been of central importance for the international expansion of executive search (Hall et al. 2009, 415-16). They are in particular deemed to have emitted a "spillover" effect on the industry more broadly, thus contributing to normalising executive search as a recruitment practice in different geographical locations.

The second aspect on market legitimacy has already been touched on previously with regards to discourses on talent management, as well as consultants' specialist expertise in search and selection. An important addition is, however, indicated in specific "discursive strategies" to frame consultants' knowledge base as "'objective'

and ‘scientifically rigorous’ and/or complex and ‘fuzzy’ depending on which is most appropriate in any one context” (Beaverstock et al. 2010, 838). Although these discursive practices are not much elaborated on, they are distinguished by emphases on formalised search and assessment techniques on the one hand, and on consultants’ abilities in handling the complexity of a search and in persuading candidates to participate in search processes on the other hand (Ibid., 838-39). As such, these two lines of argumentation can be largely characterised as emphasising methodological and practical capabilities respectively. Furthermore, Beaverstock et al. (Ibid., 839) also underline the importance of various conferences and networking events as what they call “propaganda tools” for informing clients about executive search consultants’ capabilities.

2.3 Summary and evaluation of previous literature

An overview of previous academic and non-academic literature on practices in executive search has been outlined in this chapter. Tables 1 and 2 summarise the identified main features and motives of practices in the previous literature respectively. Altogether, a considerable variety in points of view could be extracted from the reviewed literature. Regarding the features of practices, non-academic accounts have outlined many rather generic activities, whereas academic research has focused on economic and social topics. As to motives, economic and social topics have likewise been addressed while an additional viewpoint is suggested in historical factors.

As could be noted, the research on the field provides a number of insights on the features and motives of executive search practices. The few accounts in labour economics largely imply that consultants’ recruitment practices solve problems in coordinating labour matching and entail efficiency and comprehensiveness advantages for client companies. The accounts in sociology and management studies have among others indicated that the consultants’ practices involve specific activities, capabilities, knowledge, and roles, and have rather wide-ranging consequences for executive labour markets.

Table 1: Features of practices in executive search

Generic activities

- Completing the steps of a formal search process within retained recruitment contracts (AESC 2012b; BDU 2011b; FEX 2012a)
- Fulfilling roles in 1) research, screening for candidates; and 2) consulting, interacting with clients and candidates (Jenn 2005; Nehring & Schraaf 2009)
- Providing guarantees to keep clients "off-limits"; continue searches until a client is satisfied; and to replace hired candidates upon them leaving prematurely (Britton & Ball 1999)
- Market differentiation or segmentation: convergence towards large and international or small and specialised consultancies (Hall et al. 2009; Jenn 2005)
- Industry- and function-specific specialisation: consultants focusing on either a specific industry or a specific corporate function, and forming corresponding practice groups within search firms (Hofmann 2011; Jenn 2005)
- Service diversification in offering management assessment in addition to executive search services (BDU 2011a; FEX 2012b)
- Building a professional reputation based on knowledge of industry trends and the appearances of offices and consultants (AESC 2009; Khurana 2002)
- Marketing methodologies, consultative approach, inter-office teamwork, and geographical reach (Egon Zehnder 2012; Heidrick & Struggles 2012b; Kienbaum 2012b; Khurana 2002; Spencer Stuart 2012)

Economic activities

- Addressing problems of costly search, imperfect and asymmetric market information, or failure of coordination and collective action between labour supply and demand (Autor 2009; Bull et al. 1987)
- Manoeuvring in agent-principal relationships to maximise search output (Britton & Ball 1999)

Social activities

- Coordinating information of clients' job positions and aspiring candidates; mediating between clients and candidates to defuse risks and tensions; fulfilling ethical criteria for sustainable relationships with clients and candidates; and legitimating placements as a third party engaged in established recruitment processes (Khurana 2002; Melé & Roig 1995)
- Controlling clients' labour management by consolidating the role of search firms as corporate recruiters (Britton et al. 1992; Faulconbridge et al. 2009; Khurana 2002), in particular based on discourses on talent management (Christian 2002; Faulconbridge et al. 2009; Fernández-Aráoz 2007; Kenny 1979)
- Controlling candidate pools in labour markets by regulating candidates' access to positions; establishing a perceived cultural and personal fit between clients and candidates, and evaluating a distinct set of a model candidates' skills, expertise and experiences deemed to be attractive to clients (Faulconbridge et al. 2009; Coverdill & Finlay 1998; Khurana 2002)
- Gaining occupational closure by political-economy strategies of standardising professional practices and regulating industry membership (AESC 2012b; BDU 2011b; Beaverstock et al. 2010; FEX 2013; Hall et al. 2009); and cultural-economy strategies of promoting consultants' specialist technical and practical capabilities, and executive search as a general best practice in recruitment (Beaverstock et al. 2010)

Table 2: Motives of practices in executive search

Historical reasons

- Economic origins to be traced in demand for support and advice in recruitment tasks beyond companies' own competencies as of the mid 20th century (Jenn 2005); initially propelled by emergent organisational sophistication and the growth of managerial hierarchies (Cameron 1993; Chandler 1977); and eventually increasingly by rising turnover in management due to its weakening hold on corporate control and higher accountability for corporate performance (Baker & Smith 1998; Khurana 2002)
- Societal origins indicated in the disintegration of modern employment relationships (Bauman 2005; van der Loo & van Reijen 1992); changes in career conceptions and mobility, as well as workforce diversity and demographics (Reitman & Schneer 2008); the emergence of human resources as a professional field (Meyer & Rowan 1977); and the technical labour matching possibilities of the internet (Autor 2001, 2009)
- Geographical origins to be identified in the US, where search services were initially primarily provided within consulting and auditing firms to subsequently become a stand-alone business; and in growing cross-Atlantic demand from internationalising US corporations as of the 1960s (Hall et al. 2009), followed by rising demand for cross-border recruitment in the course of European integration and globalisation (AESC 2009; Beaverstock et al. 2005; Britton et al. 1997)

Economic reasons

- Consultants receiving an initial retainer and one third of the candidate's first year salary all in all plus operating expenses (Jenn 2005; Khurana 2002)
- Demand extensively contingent on the general state of the economy (AESC 2012a; BDU 2009, 2011; Britton et al. 1997; Favaro et al. 2012; Jenn 2005)
- Consultants' labour market intermediation due to efficiency and comprehensiveness gains in recruitment processes (Autor 2009; Bull et al. 1987)

Social reasons

- Demand arising from a perceived scarcity of qualified labour on the labour market; clients' failure to fill positions by other means, such as advertising, job agencies and personal contacts; clients' poor reputation and/or location; attracting passive candidates currently in the employ of other companies; maintaining confidentiality of recruitment processes; and providing accountability and legitimacy for placements with a view on norms of appropriate recruitment practices (Brown & Swain 2009; Faulconbridge et al. 2009; Khurana 2002; Nehring & Schraaf 2009)
- Consultants' role in labour matching due to superior skill, expertise and experience in identifying and attracting candidates (Beaverstock et al. 2010; Faulconbridge et al. 2009; Khurana 2002); and related discourses on talent management (Christian 2002; Faulconbridge et al. 2009; Fernández-Aráoz 2007; Kenny 1979)
- A client-service ethos in the provision of value-added services based on specialisation and service-mindedness (Faulconbridge et al. 2009)
- Occupational identity and closure stemming from standardisation of best practices (AESC 2012b; BDU 2011b; Hall et al. 2009), and consultants' specialist technical and practical capabilities (Beaverstock et al. 2010; Faulconbridge et al. 2009)

Although many important features of practices can be identified in the previous research, it should be noted that most of the studies have focused on examining general social relations. Khurana (2002, xviii), for instance, is explicit about his sociological interest on "social closure", i.e. institutional constraints, in the field. With a basis in a comprehensive set of primary and secondary sources on the industry, he provides a fairly overarching institutional analysis of the executive search field as a whole. Moreover, Faulconbridge et al. (2009, 801) and Hall et al. (2009, 400), Beaverstock et al. (2010, 826) have expressly aimed to study the power structure and social implications, internationalisation, and professional legitimation of the field respectively. In other words, the analytical level of abstraction is essentially generalised to that of the industry or the firm rather than that of the consultant. The studies do not much take individual agency into account, and are thus not very sophisticated about practitioners themselves. In particular, the relevance and meanings of the indicated practices in the daily work of practitioners remain largely unaccounted for.

The study of Beaverstock et al. (2010) on the professional legitimation of consultants can to an extent be noted as an exception to this. Especially in outlining cultural-economy legitimation, they put forward the contention that consultants make use of two general strains of "discursive strategies" on professionalism in legitimating their work practices. Whereas one of the strategies revolves around an emphasis on references to professional standards in the industry, the other is concerned with consultants' knowledge bases in technical and practical capabilities respectively. These discursive practices are, however, elaborated on in only a few paragraphs in the study. Also, while some important features of the practices are suggested, they are essentially only analysed considering the motive of professional legitimation. Moreover, although the study highlights practitioners' discursive practices, it does not much base them in existing theory on either discourses or practices.

Thus, to conclude, it could be indicated that executive search practitioners' discourse on their work practices has not been subject to very detailed analysis in previous research. As such, empirical knowledge of how practitioners make sense of the features and motives of their work practices appears incomplete. In the following two

chapters, I will strive to outline an analytical framework and a research approach for providing some additional knowledge on the matter.

3 Theoretical framework

In this chapter, the theoretical framework of the study is presented. The chapter is divided into three sections. Firstly, linguistic theory drawing from critical discourse studies will be outlined. Secondly, sociological theory with particular focus on the concepts of social practice and rationalisation is addressed. Finally, thirdly, key concepts from these theories are considered in terms of a specific analytical framework to be applied in the study.

3.1 Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is a broad methodological umbrella, comprising of differing approaches on studying language use drawing from a multitude of theoretical models primarily in the humanities and social sciences (van Dijk 2011, 1-3). In all of these approaches, an initial assumption on the role of language in social life is generally viewed as a common philosophical demarcation line: is there a reality beyond language; are there any meanings beyond what can be expressed? A well-known standpoint to these ontological and epistemological questions is that of Ludwig Wittgenstein ([1922] 1960, 27), according to which the limit to the expression of thoughts can "only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense". This led Wittgenstein to posit that "the world is everything that is the case" (Ibid., 31), but given that the facts of which the world consists of are subject to the cognitive limitations of language, "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (Ibid., 189).

According to Jørgensen & Phillips (2002, 8-12), all discourse analytical approaches have a corresponding answer to the above questions insofar as language is not a reflection of a "pre-existing reality", but rather constituting a version of reality, which is changeable. This is termed to be a poststructuralist position, i.e. a position reflecting contextual relativity of meanings. Although any absolute meanings are refuted, it nevertheless signifies that some broader ones, beyond specific and situated language use, are assumed to exist to an extent (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000, 1130).

Beyond the above fundamental assumption on the nature of language held in common in discourse research, there are many divergent analytical positions in the field at large. In the applications in organisational discourse research, the field can be broadly divided into local and macro-level analyses with a corresponding theoretical and methodological division (Ibid., 1133). On a local level, focus is on discourse at "close range", i.e. on specific situational language use in social contexts. On a macro level, discourse is considered at "long range" as a "universal" set of vocabularies, which are societally and historically situated. Regardless of conceptual level, however, discourse analysis studies cultural meanings in language practices by analysing text and talk. What discourse analyses comprise of, then, is a philosophical premise on the socially constitutive role of language itself, and a specific methodological approach. In other words:

> "In discourse analysis, *theory* and *method* are intertwined and researchers must accept the basic philosophical premises in order to use discourse analysis as their method of empirical study." (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002, 4, emphasis in original)

The specific theoretical approach taken is outlined in the following. The research method will be outlined in the subsequent Chapter 4. Both the theory and the method primarily draw on a critical discourse analytical orientation. Moreover, Fairclough (2003, 2), a prevalent author on critical discourse analysis (hereafter CDA), explicitly envisages CDA as an analytical strategy of doing social research through focusing on language. However, he is careful to underline that the approach does not presuppose that social life is equivalent or reducible to language, and that it consequently "is best used in combination with theoretical and analytical resources in various areas of social science" (Ibid., 210). With a basis in this point of view, this study seeks to combine CDA with theory in social analysis. The following subsection will address CDA specifically, whereas Section 3.2 comprises of specific theory on social practices.

3.1.1 Theoretical approaches in critical discourse analysis

As with discourse analysis generally, there are a number of different approaches for doing CDA depending on the research objective (see Meyer 2001 for an overview). In general terms, discourse analysis being "critical" means that language use in itself, the ways in which it is produced, and the social context within which it is located are examined (Wodak 2001a, 2-3). Thus, in comparison to other linguistic methods of analysing texts, CDA is regarded to lie closest to sociological and socio-psychological theoretical perspectives (Meyer 2001, 16).

The specific approach developed by Norman Fairclough will mostly be drawn on in the following. Fairclough (2003, 2) describes his version of CDA as "based upon the assumption that language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically interconnected with other elements of social life". Furthermore, Fairclough states that in order for CDA to be relevant for social science, text analysis must connect with theoretical questions about discourse. The implications of this are manifold and will be clarified next.

3.1.2 Theory on discourses

What is the meaning of the concept "discourse"? In plain terms, discourses can be understood as a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002, 1). In more elaborated terms, Fairclough et al. (2011, 357-58) give the following enumeration of what characterises discourses:

i. A discourse is an analytical category of meaning-making resources
ii. A discourse is a form of social practice
iii. A discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially shaped
iv. Discourses influence power relationships and have ideological effects

Literature on these four features will be considered in the following.

i. A discourse is a category of meaning-making resources

Discourses encompass a range of resources for denoting meanings. These resources involve various forms of "semiosis" – "words, pictures, symbols, design, colour, gesture and so forth" (Fairclough et al. 2011, 357). Depending on circumstances, different forms of semiosis are put more frequently to use for expressing meanings. For instance, people of different backgrounds may use varying vocabularies, people with hearing impairments may tend to rely on symbols or gestures in their communication, or children may prefer pictures and colours as a mode of expression. In most cases, however, both spoken and written words appear as most prevalent in a discourse.

According to Ferdinand de Saussure ([1916] 1959, 14), an early linguist, what language itself amounts to is the "social side of speech", and it is characterised by arbitrary, common rules, which unite specific sound-images to specific concepts. As such, language is essentially conceived of as a distinct social institution, a "product of both social force and time", which is moreover essentially deemed to be a constant, closed system (Ibid., 76). Languages thus set boundaries of expression and, in a more extended sense, boundaries for culture. In Fairclough's (2003, 22) view, languages set such structural constraints in terms of e.g. grammatical rules or generic conventions of speech in certain areas of life, but nevertheless in the main also grant actors considerable freedom to produce different spoken and written accounts. In doing such "texturing", actors furthermore give form to specific discursive practices.

ii. A discourse is a form of social practice

A premise for regarding a discourse as a practice is indicated in that "language […] is an element of the social at all levels" (Ibid., 24). Different "levels" in social interaction are thus deemed to have a linguistic parallel to them. On the level of social practices, it should be noted that a "dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and all the diverse elements of the situation(s), institution(s), and social structure(s) which frame it" is assumed to exist in CDA (Fairclough 2011 et al., 357). That is, a discourse is thought to both reflect existent social circumstances, but to also shape them in giving them meanings, which are potentially changeable.

In more elaborate terms still, Fairclough (2003, 206) explains the linguistic side of a social practice in terms of "an order of discourse", which entails "a particular social ordering of relationships amongst different ways of making meaning". Social practices are in other words seen to regulate how meanings are produced. Fairclough accordingly denotes a distinctive discourse as a way of "representing" a given social order. In sum: "Representation is a process of social construction of practices, including reflexive self-construction – representations enter and shape social processes and practices." (Fairclough 2003, 206)

From the viewpoint of social theory, a fairly close parallel could be drawn between this understanding of discourses as "representations" and the concept of "organisational sensemaking", as elaborated by Weick et al. (2005, 409). Similarly to the reflexive "social construction of practices" suggested above, sensemaking denotes social processes through which actions are retrospectively interpreted in order to frame them as rational. As such, it is concerned with how meanings are produced with the central aim of achieving a sense of order. A key distinction, and central prerequisite, for sensemaking is deemed to lie in novel organisational circumstances, which need to be "turned into words and salient categories" (Ibid.). Consequently, organisational sensemaking is essentially signified as a linguistic process as "sensemaking is to be understood literally, not metaphorically" (Weick 1995, 16).

iii. A discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially shaped

In keeping with the dialectic between discourses, as ways of representing meanings, and social practices, as ways of reproducing social order, indicated above, discourses are argued to be both socially constitutive as well as socially shaped (Fairclough et al. 2011, 357-58). An example of this relationship can be found with Wodak (2001b, 64), who illustrates it by making reference to the occupation of politicians. In short, politicians can be observed to both produce as well as reproduce discourses in different textual genres, such as parliamentary debates, press conferences, news interviews, party programmes and newspaper articles. Politicians shape policy more or less proactively on the one hand, but they also reflect and react to anticipated changes in the public sphere and the interests of specific social groups on the other

hand. In doing so, they can be seen to represent varying stances, such as e.g. conservative, moderate or liberal ones. Whether such given stances emerge as "dominant" or "alternative" in specific social contexts is moreover of particular interest for CDA in terms of assessing a particular social ordering (Fairclough 2003, 206).

iv. Discourses influence power relationships and have ideological effects

According to Fairclough et al. (2011, 358), CDA is concerned with clarifying the "ideological loading" and "relations of power" inherent in discourses. As some ways of talking and reasoning about any given topic may become more dominant than others, it is argued that social relations may also be affected, given e.g. preferential stances towards certain social activities. In Fairclough's (2003, 207) account, certain discourses may become hegemonic, framed as more or less common sense, legitimate viewpoint of an issue, which are, however, typically not entirely uncontested. Thus, although some ways of producing meaning may be dominant, it is assumed that different discourses are often in conflict with each other as opposing "visions of the world" (Ibid., 130).

Related to this, and also to the other characteristics of discourses enumerated by Fairclough et al. (2011), Clegg (1989: 151) provides a fairly overarching summary of the social implications of discourses:

> "Through language, our sense of ourselves as distinct subjectivities is constituted. Subjectivity is constituted through a myriad of what post-structuralists term 'discursive practices': practices of talk, text, writing, cognition, argumentation, and representation generally. The meanings of and membership within the categories of discursive practice will be constant sites of struggle over power, as identity is posited, resisted and fought over in its attachment to the subjectivity by which individuality is constructed."

To conclude on the above theory, discourses are essentially seen to denote specific, more or less dominant, ways of making meaning about given themes. Also, discourses are conceived of as dialectically related to social practices, signifying a two-way

dynamic between them. In the following, this dynamic will be considered further against concepts in sociological theory in keeping with Fairclough's (2003, 210) suggestion to couple CDA with analytical resources in a field of social science.

3.2 Social analysis

Social analysis, as a category of institutional analysis, can be broadly understood to entail a focus on various rules, mechanisms and meanings, which structure the contexts for the actions of individuals and organisations of different kinds (Campbell 2004, 1-3). Another basic premise is further to be seen in the "rejection of reductionism", i.e. essentialising arguments of the behaviour of actors based only on the qualities of the actors themselves are dismissed (Schneiberg & Clemens 2006, 195). Therefore, the behaviour of actors is not regarded as comprising of isolated incidents, but rather considered against the backdrop of contextual factors.

It may be of interest to note the differing approaches that institutional analyses entail depending on academic discipline. Three field of study are of particular significance: economics, political science and sociology (Ibid., 196; Campbell 2004, 3-4). In economics and political science, the behaviour of individual actors and collective entities are generally studied within "strategic" or "utility-maximising" models of action, often also under assumptions of rational choice within certain boundaries. In these approaches, institutions are moreover broadly regarded as a status of equilibrium made up of formal and informal rules, as well as mechanisms for monitoring for compliance to these rules. In sociology, such rules and mechanisms are also of interest. However, analyses generally work within "social" models of action, focusing on informal aspects of organisations, such as ways in which cultural and cognitive factors affect behaviour. Such models will be elaborated on more in the following.

3.2.1 Theoretical approaches in economic sociology

What is the meaning of action being social instead of being strategic or utility-maximising? In answering the question, economic sociologists often like to contrast

their views with those of economists (e.g. Bourdieu 2005; Fligstein 2001; Granovetter 1985). Bertrand Russell also strikes an instructive note on this:

> "While economics is about how people make choice, sociology is about how they don't have any choice to make." (Bourdieu 2005, inside front cover page)

The primary precursors for this understanding are to be found in scholarship of late 19th and early 20th century (Swedberg 2003, 1-6). Historical institutionalist thinking questioned the applicability of economic theories over time and space, instead underscoring the historical and cultural linkages of economic activity. The discipline was consequently largely at odds with neoclassical economics in pointing to the pervasiveness of institutional setting in determining the functioning of economies and advocating an inductive rather than a deductive research agenda. Social models of action were in other words maintained in opposition of utility-maximising models of action. What could furthermore perhaps be seen as most central to them is that they are largely unassuming as to what a sought-after utility amounts to. Boudon (1987, 64, emphasis in original) gives the following summary on this:

> "In the individualistic sociological tradition individual action is considered rational, but this rationality can take various forms as a function of the context. The actions of the social actors are always in principle understandable, provided we are sufficiently informed about their situation."

Notably, Boudon's remark makes use of an idea of rationality, often primarily ascribed to Max Weber (Smelser & Swedberg 2005, 4-5), which is about appreciating the motivational background, i.e. context of meaning, of social actions (Weber 1922, 3-4). Explaining the logic behind social actions in given circumstances is thus a main interest. In other words, the features and the contexts of social actions emerge as central on the research agenda, and Smelser & Swedberg (2005, 7) also explicitly state that a general premise for doing research in the tradition of economic sociology is that analyses encompass both economic interests and social relations.

How should the features and contexts of social actions be examined? A potential answer may be found with Schneiberg & Clemens (2006, 196), who offer a general

overview of the analytical challenges in sociological institutional analysis. They, among others, detail the central challenges of "identifying specific institutional mechanisms" and of "the analysis of coherence and heterogeneity" in social research. Whereas the former challenge is primarily theoretical in content, essentially pertaining to salient concepts for framing some social dynamic, the latter challenge concerns methods for evaluating both variety and uniformity pertaining to the relevant theoretical concepts in specific research material. The first of these two challenges will be considered next. A primary interest in doing so will be to outline concepts accounting for the characteristics and meanings of social actions and practices. The second challenge on research methods will be addressed in Chapter 4 on methodology.

3.2.2 Theory on social practices and rationalisations

Schneiberg & Clemens (Ibid.) point out that specific institutional mechanisms are often conceptualised in "cultural or cognitive models of action". Such models commonly incorporate theory on actions themselves, as well as a set of contextual factors. In the following, concepts on both dimensions will be laid out.

Social actions and practices

As already noted above, the theory of action as initially proposed by Max Weber is widely regarded to be of a foundational status in social analysis. In his model on social actions, Weber (1922, 12-13) distinguishes two primary types of rational actions, specified as 1) instrumentally rational, and 2) value-rational. Weber (Ibid.) denotes the first type, instrumental action, as geared towards achieving rationally calculated ends. In achieving such ends, expectations as to the behaviour of objects in ones environment and outcomes of interaction with other actors are taken into account in order to attain the highest possible utility. The second type, value-rational action, is characterised as orientated on an intrinsic value of an action. That is, such actions are perceived as meaningful also independent of eventual end results.

When regarded as more than isolated incidents, the types of social actions are deemed to form "regularities and patterns" (Kalberg 1980, 1148). Such patterns moreover

largely emerge against specific background factors, which are either internal or external to the specific actors. In carrying out a specific action, actors can in other words be seen to relate to a vast range of determinants. In accounting for these, the notion of a "social practice" (Reckwitz 2002, 249) can be identified as particularly useful, as it encompasses the motives and circumstances of actions. More specifically, a social practice can be characterised as:

> "… a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge." (Ibid.)

In other words, a practice is conceived of as the entirety of these elements put together in different patterns. As such, it is indicated that a practice depends on how the elements interrelate, and may not be reduced to any single one of them. Moreover, as distinctively social "patterns of bodily behaviour" and "certain routinized ways of understanding, knowing how and desiring", practices are presented as rational features in the specific culture within which they are located (Ibid., 250). Their properties are thus not to be seen as equivalent to those of specific individual actors carrying them out. Rather, a single individual, "as a bodily and mental agent", is essentially seen to act as the "carrier" of a practice, comprising of mutually constituted and shared ways of acting and reasoning of several actors. While being a carrier of a number of varying social practices, an individual can nevertheless be deemed to occupy a specific disposition of acting and reasoning. As such, although practices are conceived of as social constructs, individuality emerges in the ways in which individuals are socialised in relation to a network of practices, which can moreover be largely denoted as their "habitus" (Bourdieu 2005, 84).

As defined above, practices comprise of several elements. These include, among others, dispositions of the body, the mind, toward external objects, in knowledge, in discourse and of individuals. Reckwitz (2002, 250-57) addresses each in some depth. Some main features can be noted about these dimensions:

- *Body* – Social practices entail the performance of physical, as well intellectual activities in a certain way (Ibid., 251). As such, objects related to a practice are among others handled or talked and written about in a certain socially conditioned way.
- *Mind* – Social practices are moreover implied to entail specific mental activities, among others comprising of ways of "understanding the world" and of "knowing how to do something" (Ibid.).
- *Objects* – With regards to external objects, it is argued that practices prescribe using things, for instance ranging from practical tools to different mediums of information, in a particular way as resources to realise aims of the practice (Ibid., 252-53).
- *Knowledge* – Social practices contain different forms of collective and "historically-culturally specific" knowledge, which give rise to interpretations of the other dimensions of practices so that they form coherent parts of the practice as a whole (Ibid., 253).
- *Discourse* – Social practices, as discursive practices, "embrace different forms in which the world is meaningfully constructed in language or in other sign-systems" (Ibid., 254). As such, discourses, as largely noted in Subsection 3.1.2, feature in practices as routinised ways of ascribing meanings.
- *The individual* – As acknowledged above, practice theory regards individuals as "carriers" of practices. In addition, Reckwitz (Ibid., 256) notes that the individual, as "someone who understands the world and herself, [and] who uses know-how and motivational knowledge", is seen to carry out a diverse range of social practices at once and is thus "the unique crossing point of practices".

The elements accounted for above can be seen to provide a distinct framework for analysing the features of practices. Moreover, as to how these elements are related to social contexts, it has been suggested that practices entail "specific" or "certain" dispositions depending on the respective context. In order to link the categorisation on practices, as routinised types of behaviour, to specific motives underlying the types of behaviour, literature on such contextual factors will be considered in the following.

Rationalisation

How does social theory account for the motives of actions given that actions are seen as taking place in specific contexts? As brought forward previously, a foundational starting point for considering rational action can be seen in the definition of rationality in terms of appreciating the contexts of meaning in specific situations (Smelser & Swedberg 2005, 4-5; Weber 1922, 3-4). Moreover, two main types of social action, instrumentally rational and value-rational (Weber 1922, 12-13), were briefly described. Building on these notions, it should be emphasised that Weber's model moreover regards rational patterns of actions as conducive to specific types of social rationality, which essentially correspond to given types of motives as well (Kalberg 1980, 1148).

Four primary types can be distinguished in Weber's work on rationalities: practical, formal, substantive and theoretical rationality (Ibid., 1151-59). These are made up of both instrumentally and value-rational actions as "the patterns of civilizational and societal processes they identify involve simply conscious regularities of action orientations on the part of individuals and, in some cases, 'ways of life'" (Ibid., 1149). In other words, "rationality" here signifies any mindful and consistent orientation of, or attitude towards, action. An adaption of the model is presented in Table 3. The model addresses the social actions and motives, which constitute rationalities.

Table 3: General types of social action and rationality

Rationality	Social action	Reference for social action
Practical	Instrumentally rational	Pragmatic interests
Formal	Instrumentally rational	Rules (calculation methods)
Substantive	Value-rational	Value postulates
Theoretical	Only by extension (instrumentally rational, value-rational)	Values or theoretical problems

Adapted from Kalberg (1980, 1161) and Weber (1922, 44-45)

The first type – practical rationality – relates to behavioural dispositions with pragmatic and self-centred interests as their basis (Ibid., 1151). In this orientation, the conditions of everyday life are regarded as factual realities and met with the instrumentally rational means with the highest utility. This is prominently exemplified by reference to that businesspeople and entrepreneurs are often compelled to engage in instrumentally rational actions and pursue pragmatic ends. Kalberg (Ibid., 1152) moreover provides the following conclusion: "The pragmatic and this-worldly disposition of practical rational patterns of action implies a subordination of individuals to given realities and a concomitant inclination to oppose all orientations based on transcendence of daily routine."

The second type – formal rationality – is reasoning conducive to utility maximisation of an economic unit within the bounds of available rational calculation methods (Weber 1922, 44-45). This means that it is instrumentally rational and characterised by clear rules as to how optimal results should be attained. Weber's prominent example of formal rationality is seen in bureaucratic domination. According to Kalberg (1980, 1158-59), bureaucratic organisation is strictly orientated towards following and retaining given abstract and universally applicable rules. Instrumental actions are consequently rationalised by reference to calculations of utility based on such formal rules.

The third type – substantive rationality – has a "value postulate" as the grounds according to which action is rationalised (Weber 1922, 45). This means that value-rational objectives, be they "ethical, political, utilitarian, hedonistic, communal, egalitarian or other" (Ibid., my translation), measure the success of actions. Also, substantive rationalities may take issue not only with the result, but also the means of action, and vary significantly in capacity of organisation (Kalberg 1980, 1155). What is deemed rational is essentially dependent on the set of values espoused:

> "Something is not of itself 'irrational,' but rather becomes so when examined from a specific 'rational' *standpoint*. Every religious person is 'irrational' for every irreligious person, and every hedonist likewise views every ascetic way of life as 'irrational,' even if, measured in terms of *its* ultimate values, a 'rationalization' has

> taken place." (Weber [1930] 1958, 53, n. 9, reproduced in Kalberg 1980, 1156, emphases in original)

The fourth type – theoretical rationality – refers to the use of abstract concepts, rather than actions, to come to grips with reality (Weber [1922-1923] 1946, 293). It derives from cognitive processes, such as logical deduction and induction, and the use of symbolism to denote meanings. In particular, theoretical rationality is concerned with constructing "world views", which explain the surrounding reality in a meaningful way (Kalberg 1980, 1153-54). Priests and scientists are mentioned as archetypal proponents of theoretical rationalisations, which may further come to influence the thought and, by extension, the actions of others. In other words, theoretical rationality does not directly translate to actions on its own, but may do so by extension in terms of another type of rationality.

In sum, given rationalities correspond to different types of actions and motivations in Weber's typology. Furthermore, when situated within social contexts, Kalberg (1980, 1160-61) argues that "they are institutionalized as normative regularities of action within 'legitimate orders'", such as organisations and various other forms of domination and attribution. In other words, particular rationalities are seen to correspond to certain sources of legitimacy, which provide them with a contextual basis. That is, particular actions are rationalised against the backdrop of a legitimating instance. This notion is elaborated on more in the following.

Legitimation

Contemporary accounts on organisational legitimacy can be seen to parallel Weber's model fairly closely. In addressing a similar concern on organisational conditions for thriving in a social environment, Scott (2001, 58-9) makes reference to Suchman's (1995) review of theory on organisational legitimacy as illustrative towards this end. Indeed, he regards actions, embedded in social contexts, as contingent on acceptance and credibility:

> "From an institutional perspective, legitimacy is not a commodity to be possessed or exchanged but a condition reflecting perceived consonance with relevant rules and

> laws, normative support, or alignment with cultural-cognitive frameworks." (Scott 2001, 59)

In his typology of organisational legitimacy, Suchman (1995, 577-83) distinguishes three main types. These are denoted as pragmatic, moral and cognitive respectively, and "involve a generalized perception or assumption that organisational activities are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Ibid., 577).

The first type – pragmatic legitimacy – is based on the more or less direct interests of an organisation's immediate constituencies, i.e. parties affected by an organisation's activities (Ibid., 578). Although it is deemed to mostly concern "direct exchanges" between organisations and such parties, "broader political, economic, or social interdependencies" can also be involved. As such, pragmatic legitimacy essentially stems from three categories: 1) directly valuable exchanges, 2) in terms of contributing to a "larger interest", or 3) a perceived disposition of that organisations "share our values" or are "trustworthy".

The second type – moral legitimacy – entails a normative evaluation of organisational activities. As such, the potential benefits for organisational constituents in the form of interests are not a central concern, as it rather "reflects a prosocial logic that differs fundamentally from narrow self-interests" (Ibid., 579). "The right thing to do", with regards to results and consequences, techniques and procedures, as well as actors' social positions and roles, is consequently promoted in evaluations. Organisational activities, and the conditions related to how they are carried out, are in other words essentially viewed against a given value base.

Finally, the third type – cognitive legitimacy – is grounded on the comprehensibility or taken-for-grantedness of organisational circumstances (Ibid., 582). That is, instead of interests or evaluations as bases of legitimacy as in the other two types, specific culturally conditioned ways of understanding organisational circumstances as either useful or necessary emerge as central. In the former sense of cognition, "cultural models that furnish plausible explanations for the organization and its endeavors" are underlined. In the latter sense, institutional rules and norms framing organisational

realities as “givens” and rendering alternative explanations unthinkable, are noted as decisive (Ibid., 583).

Some parallels could potentially be drawn between the above models of organisational legitimacy and social rationality, as it has been indicated that social actions are rationalised given a “legitimate order”. Significantly, interests, rules, values, and concepts appear generally characteristic to them as the bases against which rationality or legitimacy are respectively established. As such, these theories altogether largely suggest that the social actions of individuals, and the aggregate social practices which they constitute, can be seen to draw from a variety of rational and legitimate references in determining their respective disposition.

3.3 Summary of theoretical framework

In this chapter, the theoretical framework of the study has been laid out. The framework is based on discourse analytic and social theories. The primary aim of the chapter has been to outline concepts for examining discourses with a view on the features and meanings of practices. In light of the presented concepts, a specific analytical framework for assessing the research material of the study is suggested.

Based on the literature on critical discourse analysis, discourses have essentially been defined as specific and routinised ways of meaningfully framing social reality. As such, in a general sense, they are seen to signify particular and coherent language use. Moreover, and more specifically, discourses are assumed to both “make meaning” and represent given themes in a socially conditioned way.

The theory on social practices could be seen to provide categories for analysis in detailing a number of elements of social practices, briefly defined as routinised types of behaviour. Specific physical and mental activities related to objects and discourse, knowledge and know-how, and individual dispositions could be generalised as main elements of practices. With regards to the relation of these elements to contextual meanings, a general framework of types of rationality and legitimacy, essentially detailing a variety of motives of actions, could be indicated.

Altogether, these concepts generalise on a number of dimensions of social practices, and make fairly broad analytical distinctions. Nevertheless, they can be argued to provide specific grounds for framing some of the features and meanings of practices. The methodological approach taken for analysing the research material in keeping with the analytical framework is considered in the following chapter.

4 Methodology

In this chapter, the research methodology of the study is presented in three sections. Firstly, the research material is described. Section two outlines the application of the interviewing method. Thirdly, the qualitative research approach, specifically in terms of critical discourse analysis and analytical generalisations, is laid out.

4.1 Research material

The material used in this study stems from five semi-structured interviews with executive search consultants at an international executive search firm based in Germany. The interviews were conducted over two days on 29th of February and 1st of March 2012, lasting from between 45 minutes to 1 hour and 45 minutes, and in average 1 hour and 19 minutes. They were recorded with the approval of the interviewees and subsequently transcribed in full. All in all, roughly 7,400 words were in average transcribed per interview, which brings the total material to around 37,000 words. Four of the interviews were conducted in German and one in Swedish. The excerpts from the interviews in the subsequent presentation of findings in Chapter 5 are thus my own translations into English (one respondent, however, also replied to a few questions directly in English).

The company is among the leading executive search firms in Germany, and also among the largest in Europe. The office at which the interviews were conducted is one of the firm's major business locations. The five persons interviewed were of the following formal positions: one consultant, one senior consultant, two partners and one managing director. They conduct retained searches in several industries, including but not limited to financial services, engineering and consumer goods.

All respondents characterised their focus as primarily being on top and middle management positions. Specifically, the job positions the consultants had experience in placing ranged from board members, managing directors, senior vice presidents, directors, and business unit and country managers to functional specialists. The job

positions' functions included marketing and sales, finance and accounting, manufacturing, research and development, as well as human resources.

The majority of the searches of three of the respondents were done regionally and nationally, but each of them had also been involved in several international assignments in countries such as the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Spain. The remaining two out of the five respondents had international assignments as their speciality, in particular in the Nordic countries, but also in a number of other European locations, such as the three noted above as well as Italy and Russia as notable additions.

4.2 Interviewing

The interviews were conducted according to the semi-structured interview guide in Appendix I. The main themes in the guide related to:

- The consultant's formal position and areas of focus at the firm
- Work activities, capabilities, processes and roles
- The executive search field and the executive labour market

The themes in the interviews were selected based on readings done on the field and my own personal experiences while working during two internships and a number of subsequent freelance assignments, primarily in candidate research, approach and assessment tasks, at the respondents' firm. Moreover, the themes were purposively chosen with the aim of producing primary material for addressing the stated research questions in this study. This aim also guided the choice of using interviews as the research method. Although the interview guide provided an initial semi-structured framework, the general striving in the interviews was to encourage deviations from the questions. This was done in order to allow the respondents to offer their own definitions of the interview themes, and potential additional "meanings attached" (Silverman 2006, 25) to be expressed.

It should be noted that the rendered accounts are likely to have been extensively impacted by that the interviews were conducted personally by myself, and given my prior work-related relationship with the respondents. When being regarded reflexively, i.e. as collaboratively produced "versions" of themes in the interview context (Rapley 2004, 16), the accounts can thus be assumed to, among others, reflect my specific relation to the respondents in addition to the interview situation at large. The responses may potentially have been characterised by some frankness following from my familiarity with both the respondents and their work, as would be the case when following a "humanistic method" where a researcher strives to closely associate with individuals (Alasuutari 2001, 97-99), but should in other words be viewed as distinctive collaborative and situated versions of the interview topics.

4.3 Qualitative analysis

As noted in Subsection 3.2.1 on theoretical approaches in economic sociology, Schneiberg & Clemens (2006, 196) highlight the analysis of "coherence and heterogeneity" as a major methodological challenge. By this is essentially meant that in studying any kind of social dynamic, some research layouts may not allow findings to deviate from initially hypothesised coherence. As such, the aim to note heterogeneity essentially revolves around obtaining a "fine-grained analysis of meanings" (Ibid., 210).

A central concern in evaluating meanings is specifically to be seen in "devising indicators of cognitive or cultural elements" (Ibid., 209). Relatedly, Schneiberg & Clemens (Ibid., 211, emphasis in original) point out that in studying such elements "a common measurement strategy has been to use actors' discursive output as *topics* for analysis, that is, as documentation of cognitive frames, principles, or institutional logics". As laid out previously, in terms of specific "cultural elements", this study aims to examine meanings given to elements of executive search practices by actors in the field. Also, the "discursive output" of the actors is the indicated topic of analysis. The specific steps taken in the analysis are considered in the following.

4.3.1 Critical discourse analysis

Fairly similar research approaches as in this study may be found in e.g. Berglund & Werr (2000) and Meriläinen et al. (2004). In these studies, the researchers focused on studying discourses used by management consultants in legitimating their activities and in explaining their professional role respectively. Berglund & Werr (2000, 633) observed and interviewed people involved in a management consulting project and subsequently outlined how "in legitimating their activities, consultants produce a great array of arguments based on two contradictory myths or master-ideas recurrent in the business discourse". Their aim was thus essentially to explicate the bases for a consultants' professional position. Meriläinen et al. (2004, 539) interviewed management consultants in order to "explore the discursive possibilities available to men and women when they construct their professional self as 'knowledge workers' in multinational management consultancies". In doing this, they in particular strived to "show the relevance of placing micro-discourses in context" (Ibid.). As such, in focusing on executive search practitioners' discourse, the research layout of this study has similarities to these studies.

Specifically in terms of CDA, the study attempts a "close-range" approach, which is useful when examining "the reconstruction of everyday procedures" of social actors (Meyer 2001, 19). The analysis is thus concerned with the respondent accounts in themselves and the local context within which they are situated, as close-range studies should emphasise the "need to take social context and interactions seriously" (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000, 1134). Indeed, as the amount of material to be examined in this study is very limited, the study is essentially intent on "locally explaining" the empirical observations (Alasuutari 2001, 243-5, my translation). In other words, focus lies on analysing the distinctions of the material itself, while its relation to a wider context is only noted in subsequent discussion.

As has been suggested, CDA comprises both specific linguistic and social theory, as well as research techniques. While considering CDA as conducive to "language critique", Fairclough (2003, 209-10) outlines five general stages for realising it as a method. The relationship of these to the study is briefly considered in the following.

In general, it should be noted that a limited application of the method is considered here due to many aspects of it being beyond the scope of the study.

Fairclough conceives of the first stage in terms of a "focus upon a social problem with a semiotic aspect" (Ibid., 209). Although he is most intent on designating CDA to producing "knowledge which can lead to emancipatory change", this step can perhaps more broadly be understood as noting a social research topic with a semiotic parallel. Such a topic has been noted in executive search consultants' discourses on their work practices. However, additional social problematisation is beyond the scope of this study.

The second stage of the method largely comprises of analysing: 1) the "network of practices" within which a perceived problem is situated, 2) the ways in which semiosis relates to "other elements within the particular practice(s) in questions", and 3) the social and linguistic features of the discourse itself (Ibid.). Pertaining to the two first points, the study has sought to account for such contextual factors of discourses on executive search practices by reviewing previous literature on the field. In particular, a central aim in compiling the interview guide was to note pertinent topics for practices of executive search based on the literature review. As such, the study has aimed to provide historical and contemporary references in keeping with the notion that "every discourse is historically produced and interpreted, that is, it is situated in time and space" (Wodak 2001a, 3).

The realisation of the third point of the second stage is laid out in Chapter 5 on findings. Here, the study attempts to follow Fairclough's (2003, 129) suggestion, according to which one can best identify and characterise discourses in a text – in this case the interview transcripts – by specifying: 1) the main parts of their representations of a reality, that is, their main themes, and 2) the point of view from which the themes are represented. As such, attention is in particular given to "speech acts, coherence and intertextuality, all of which situate talk and text into its context" (Ibid., 236). Also, the analysis strives to outline the discourses as analytical generalisations based on Wodak's (2001b, 93) suggestion to "operationalize the research questions into linguistic categories", which should be applied "sequentially

on the text while using theoretical approaches to interpret the meanings resulting from the research questions".

The third stage of the method is concerned with critiquing the social implications of a specific social order. The general research agenda of CDA on this stage can be seen to largely revolve around revealing the bases behind power and ideology. In Wodak's (2001b, 65) terms, CDA entails a "socio-diagnostic critique" in which one "demystifies" the particular character of discursive practices in their broader frame of social and political circumstances. Although any such social critique is, as already noted, beyond the scope of this study, the analysis nevertheless seeks to account for the motives of practices of executive search in their social context.

Stage four of the method revolves around propositions of change to social circumstances in keeping with the social critique. As Wodak (2001b, 65) points out, critical discourse studies are sometimes prone to making statements of what is "right" and what is "wrong", something of which she is fairly critical. Although analyses should in her view aim to inform actual practice, they should refrain from blunt value judgements and justify the validity of respective interpretations of discursive events on the basis of transparently laid out theory (Ibid., 93). This view is largely drawn from in this study, as a goal is to consider the research material in its local context and in view of the analytical framework.

Finally, the fifth stage of the method is characterised as pertaining to reflecting critically on the analysis itself. According to Wodak (2001a, 9), a critical analysis should among others entail an objective outlook on data, regarding the data in its social context, conceding a certain political stance, and focusing on self-reflection in the analysis – why and from which perspective has an analysis been done? This stage, already to an extent considered regarding the research material and the method of interviewing, will be considered at large in the following subsection.

4.3.2 Analytical generalisations

The analysis in this study is essentially exploratory. This has, however, not meant that the approach would be purely inductive, as the analysis relies on theoretical concepts in the analytical framework. As such, the analysis strives to not only provide a descriptive analysis as a case study answering a "what" question (Alasuutari 2001, 215). Instead, in order to be able to assess the contextual meanings of findings, the questions "why" and "how" are noted, much in keeping with a social constructionist research orientation (Silverman 2006, 44).

According to Alasuutari (2001, 40-41), doing analytical categorisations in answering such "why's" and "how's" as research questions necessitates a simplification, i.e. a reduction of data to essentials. Moreover, once initially reduced, the process of simplification also entails combining separate observations to form a single one by establishing a common denominator. Emphasis should lie on establishing commonalities between theoretically and methodologically relevant findings. When separate observations are combined in this way, they amount to a "meta-observation", which signifies an attempt to regard a topic in more general terms (Ibid., 237, my translation).

Moreover, it is argued that criteria for categorising findings should be unambiguous, and that this necessitates researchers to explicitly specify appropriate empirical generalisations – abundantly exemplified by excerpts – from their findings (Alasuutari 2001, 120-1). Alasuutari (Ibid., 212-3) also underlines that while categorising findings and subsequently constructing a typology, i.e. a set of rules which apply to specific selections of findings, one has to take into account all observations. A typology should be "complete" in forming a coherent and internally consistent picture of a given phenomenon, in a way that all findings fit into it and no "leftover" categories are needed. It may be of interest to further note that Alasuutari (Ibid.) makes ample reference to Weber's typology of rationalities, which has been drawn from in the theoretical framework of the study (see Subsection 3.2.2), as an example of a complete typology insofar as it is assumed that all aspects of social action can be ascribed to a given type of rationality.

Such generalisations may, however, not be entirely unproblematic. In Silverman's (2006, 46-47) view, notable analytical challenges on this note are "the problem of reliability" and "the problem of anecdotalism". Whereas the former refers to the degree of consistency in categorisation and interpretation of observations, the latter pertains to the validity of the analysis.

Reliability appears particularly concerned with the consistency of research practice in presenting evidence to support a conclusion, as well as the adequate description of the methods and theories put to use (Silverman 2005, 282). In particular, a case is made for including "low-inference descriptors", which means providing ample extracts of interview data while presenting findings (Ibid., 287). The latter problem – "anecdotalism" – essentially revolves around that material, which may be appropriate to prove a point, is emphasised on the expense of the general representativeness of sample data. Thus researchers may report on "a few telling 'examples'" of a phenomenon and omit to analyse unclear or contradictory data (Silverman 2006, 46-47).

To avoid problems of reliability and anecdotalism in doing analytical generalisations, the striving in the analysis is towards providing a representative survey of findings, especially noting low-inference excerpts, without essentialising them or overtly reducing them to satisfy theoretical interests. Accounting for input, which appears typical either to an individual interview or across several interviews, is in other words a central aim in compiling the explanatory model for the findings.

The criteria for categorising the findings in terms of specific discourses on practices are based on the analytical framework summarised in Section 3.3 on the elements and contextual motives of social practices. This is largely in keeping with Wodak's (2001b, 93) suggestion, also noted previously, to interpret "meanings resulting from the research question" in light of theoretical approaches. With regards to the features of practices of executive search, the analysis draws on the outlined theory on the elements of social practices. As such, three general dimensions on practices are noted as analytical distinctions: categories of general – physical and mental – activities, specific knowledge and know-how, and individual role orientations. With regards to the motives of practices of executive search, the models of rationality and legitimacy,

essentially noting interests, rules, values, and concepts as types of motives, are drawn from as analytical distinctions.

5 Findings

In this chapter, the findings on the respondents' discourse are laid out in two sections. The features of work practices are addressed first, and the motives of work practices subsequently. Four discourses, essentially signifying distinctive ways of talking and reasoning about practices, on the two themes have been identified. They are denoted as "entrepreneurial", "functional", "professional" and "conceptual" with the aim of reflecting their typical characteristics. These main characteristics are summarised in Table 4, and discussed further in Chapter 6.

5.1 Features of practices in executive search

In this section, the features of work practices are accounted for. In brief, the practices of matching clients and prospective job candidates, realising established executive search processes, offering critical recruitment advisory, as well as providing strategic input on recruitment practices could be indicated as general themes in the respective discourses. Within each discourse, accounts on three dimensions on the features of practices are noted: 1) general activities, comprising of typical work priorities, 2) specific knowledge and know-how in the executive search process, and 3) role orientation, i.e. the consultants' position towards their constituents.

5.1.1 Entrepreneurial discourse

General activities

When asked about the features of their work, it could be noted that the respondents' accounts involved, among others, fairly practical narratives. One respondent framed such a general, hands-on point of view distinctively while replying to an introductory question:

Table 4: Discourses of executive search consultants on their work practices

Discourse	Features of practices	Motives of practices
Entrepreneurial	*General activities* - Mediating between clients and prospective job candidates, managing their respective preferences and expectations *Specific knowledge and know-how* - General market expertise - Intuitive candidate evaluation techniques - Aim to evaluate the personal fit between clients and candidates *Role orientation* - Scope of activities within matching clients and candidates	*Rationalisation* - Personal interests: Direct and tangible results Individual abilities and engaging work - Social interests: Long-term business commitments with clients *Legitimation* - The practical necessity of specialisation in executive recruitment Superior recruiting know-how and candidate access compared to clients' HR departments or corporate boards
Functional	*General activities* - Researching the executive labour market by utilising specific market research resources *Specific knowledge and know-how* - Specialised market expertise - Semi-structured candidate evaluation techniques - Aim to evaluate the normative fit between clients and candidates *Role orientation* - Scope of activities within established executive search processes	*Rationalisation* - Personal rules: A knowledge base on specialised market research and recruitment methods - Social rules: The economic necessity of intermediaries in external recruitment in meeting market demand *Legitimation* - Utilitarian contribution Efficiency and transparency in labour markets, i.e. advocacy of comprehensiveness and meritocracy - Normative contribution Compliance with organisational policies and formal regulation in terms of a best practice - Socio-economic contribution Addressing contemporary recruitment challenges affecting the composition of candidate pools

Table 4: Discourses of executive search consultants on their work practices (continued)

Discourse	Features of practices	Motives of practices
Professional	*General activities* - Sustaining market stability, confidence and quality standards *Specific knowledge and know-how* - Critical and constructive approach on evaluation techniques - Aim to promote values in candidate placements and to establish a cultural fit between clients and candidates *Role orientation* - Scope of activities within principled recruitment advisory	*Rationalisation* - Personal values: Personal integrity in keeping with a set of guiding principles - Social values: Clients' added value in consultants' critical and principled advisory, especially in relation to business trends *Legitimation* - Professionalisation of corporate management ensuing from established executive search processes, in particular as contrasted with past recruitment practices - Assumption of responsibility for corporate performance and recruitment practices beyond a consultant's direct actions
Conceptual	*General activities* - Theoretical reflection on concepts related to practices of executive search *Specific knowledge and know-how* - Analytical distinctions for evaluating position profiles and candidates - Aim to define ideals in candidate placements *Role orientation* - Scope of activities within strategic recruitment advisory	*Rationalisation* - An awareness of fundamental economic and social values in recruiting *Legitimation* - The theoretical basis of executive search in relation to socio-economic concepts - Contribution in creating awareness of developments and solutions in recruiting

(1) Interviewer: “In concrete terms, what would you say that you are doing?”
(2) Respondent: “That’s an interesting question. Making the world a better place, surely? … No, no, no – if we think about executive search, there are certain driving forces in a project. One is first of all that you have contact with the client side … There you have to be very clear, transparent, tough and very strict in terms of … managing the client’s project, which is expected to be resolved within 6-8 weeks, typically.”

Notably, the initial, utopian remark was followed by some good-natured laughter, and the same respondent also later on framed work activities as primarily concerning (3) “business, project management and networking”. Other respondents also echoed this point of view to a considerable extent. Taken together, these “entrepreneurial” accounts on work activities essentially framed the overall success of a search project as contingent on the management of clients’ and candidates’ preferences and expectations. Mediation, in particular in terms of acquiring applicable information and in persuading the two parties to cooperate, thus emerged as the most crucial activity in the discourse.

Indeed, two respondents provided the following basic remarks on their market interactions:

(4) “You have to be a very nice person out on the market, networking with countless people.”

(5) “There is always the kind of myth that the recruitment consultant is a walking address book, a contact, a strong networker.”

Regarding interactions specifically with clients, all respondents largely emphasised the importance of signalling credibility. Two respondents exemplified this as follows:

(6) “You only get an assignment if you can convince the customer of yourself and your expertise.”

(7) “If they want to gain the trust of clients, executive search consultants … have to be able to negotiate on an equal footing, and … bring along personality [and] skills, enabling them to do this. This is sometimes not yet given at a young age – exceptions prove the rule.”

Moreover, understanding the specific circumstances of the respective job position to be filled, as well as the clients' decision-making processes generally, were central concerns on the relationships with clients. Three respondents elaborated as follows:

(8) "The really most important thing at the beginning is that you focus and spend enough time with the client, with the hiring manager … That's when you get the feeling what kind of a person it should be, and really a little bit this that you can't write on paper: what they're after."

(9) "With knowledge of the company, … the business model, … the market trends, … the corporate culture, and … the expectations of the candidates in the market: what are actual decision criteria for a change, and what are decision criteria for a specific company?"

(10) "Every client is specific and has its own internal processes. Every client requires a certain way of handling because decision-making processes in some companies are very, very long, slow, maybe political – then you have to find the persons, the political ties".

(11) "There [in an executive search process] you have to see: will you also get them through? … There are plenty of consultants … who may talk with 100 people in a process, [but finally] haven't recruited a single one. Then you have the decision that you have to make as a consultant: when do you start pushing? When do you say: 'This is the best that you get on the market, you won't get more'."

In interacting with prospective job candidates, persuasion was a marked consideration. In particular, understanding the decision-making rationales for job changes, as suggested in excerpt 9, was deemed to be crucial also by another respondent:

(12) "We really do our best and, let's call it, convince top talent on the market to meet our client and go for this place, and find the drivers, which really then potentially drive these candidates to the client. And it's of course often the case in an executive search process [that] interest goes in an upward curve. That is, in the beginning it's maybe like that that they barely come to meet us … and then it grows along the process."

Specific knowledge and know-how

The above accounts on the general activities of mediating between clients and candidates could be seen to draw on fairly experiential knowledge and know-how. That is, the perception on specific expertise appeared to be practically conditioned. Further indications of this could also be found in the respondents' discourse on

conducting an executive search process concerning the themes of: 1) market expertise, and 2) candidate evaluation methods and aims.

Regarding the perceptions of expertise in the search process, the relevant knowledge for conducting them appeared based on rather general market experiences. Two respondents commented:

(13) "The consultant has very good experience in the labour market and has a very good sense of [if] people from a particular company may fit into the culture of another. You have a feeling for salary levels, you know, shall we say, who's in the status of wanting to change jobs."

(14) "Knowledge – let's put it like this: I had never had anything to do with [a specific field of expertise] until I back then [when starting doing assignments in the field] indirectly learned … Knowledge is constantly improving, it has to be said. One nowadays knows, I'd say, essentially everything after a year."

(15) "How to see behind [the general impression made by candidates] is through being established on the market: that you have people, have confidential discussions, talk about people, talk about the market. For example, a former boss, [or] for example, a client, that we as headhunters have a good relationship with ... So that is very important: behind-lying factors, so to speak, to really get to know the person."

On a more critical note, one respondent expressed the view that some in the field were making use of such general market expertise to portray themselves as experts in industries in which they in fact were not. As the respondent moreover put it, they were doing this in order to (16) "get business done, no matter in which way".

Regarding the second main theme on specific knowledge and know-how – candidate evaluation methods and aims – the outlined evaluation techniques appeared to be of an intuitive nature, whereas their primary aim could be identified in establishing a personal "fit" between clients and candidates. Two out of the five respondents elaborated thoroughly on this line of thinking.

The methods considered essentially revolved around a sensibility for character and culture. Most emblematic of such were the concepts of "feeling" and "listening". In finding candidates, having a (17) "gut feeling, a heart feeling for persons and

circumstances" was underlined by one of the respondents, especially in order to be able to make sense of the structures of companies and the positions of individuals within them. In interviewing candidates, both of the concepts found resonance:

(18) "It's often within the first five minutes that you get a feeling: 'Is this going to work or isn't this going to work with this client, or could this be something for another client?' ... Much depends on the feeling. Then we in part of course work with our interview reports and semi-structured interviews, which enable us to compare the candidates. But those who make the cut to the short list – [that] depends a lot on cultural, personal characteristics."

(19) "Listening, … that you really listen and actually absorb the information because you only guide … the candidate in the conversation and always listen point by point so that they don't digress right or left, and then also that you can read between the lines … To be sure, I've already been listening before [gaining experience in evaluating candidates], but there's still really the reading something between the lines, considering once more in retrospect: 'Why did he answer like that to that question?'."

Specifically concerning the aims of candidate evaluation, all respondents talked of them in terms of satisfying clients' interests. Thus, having an eye on how candidates would come across with clients was deemed crucial. One respondent was particularly outspoken on this:

(20) "It depends on the client and the requirements, but mainly the candidate convinces by … being able to present him or herself in a business-minded, business-like, professional way, direct and exactly like asked. So, ability to listen and present as we ask … Many people just talk, talk, talk, and don't realise to listen to the person who is interviewing, which would never work in a client presentation situation. Some people are very stressed – this would also not work in a client situation. Regardless of how impressive the CV is, regardless of how impressive the person is, [they] would never succeed in a client presentation."

The concern with how candidates and clients would interact was furthermore largely framed in terms of the concept of a personal "fit", partly in contrast to technical competence or other formal characteristics. That is, personal rapport was particularly emphasised while other credentials were conceived of more sceptically. Four of the respondents elaborated as follows:

(21) "Especially in top level projects, you have to be able to assess to what extent different people can cooperate properly."

(22) "The [technically] fittest [person] can be the fittest as much as anything, but that doesn't necessarily fit into the role, culture and the business."

(23) "Really, I can quote that [expectations that candidates should live up to] from the textbook, but that doesn't bring you anything."

(24) "For me it's important to find the right candidate, regardless of gender. I find the discussion on gender very good, but what ultimately counts for me is that I have the best fit."

Role orientation

As indicated in the above discourse, general activities in executive search could be identified in terms of mediation between clients and candidates. Specific knowledge and know-how in carrying out search assignments, essentially pertaining to general market expertise and the evaluation of a personal "fit" in placements, could also be noted. The role of the consultants in light of these features of practices could accordingly be identified in matching clients and candidates. The respondents' discourse also indicated some more specific dimensions of the role, as suggested in the comments of three respondents:

(25) "Most actors with regards to [the respondent's company] are completely networked. Most speak with us, it could also be said, when you look at this from the candidates' side."

(26) "People partly perhaps, you could dare to say, look up to the field, so they have a certain respect and a certain sense of honour when in contact with a headhunter. There are some specific, I'd say power and influence things in the whole thing."

(27) "As a rule, I would estimate it like that that [in] at least 70 [to] 80 % [of placements] … the favourite [candidate] of the consultant will be followed through with."

A certain position of influence in intermediating between clients and candidates could be inferred from these excerpts. However, although the potential influence inherent in the consultants' role appeared to be acknowledged, some reservations were also expressed as to the actual scope of it. In particular, consultants were perceived of as more concerned with acquiring information for carrying out their search mandates than purposely exercising any specific influence by one respondent:

(28) "It's little input, but it's much, much capturing information and getting to know new people … You're always open to meeting new potential candidates or even clients. So it's more a networking aspect …, input partly as well, but that's then from a labour market point of view, the sort of thing you can share, and you can't share everything."

To conclude, the above discourse on the features of work practices appeared characterised by a hands-on orientation. Mediation between clients and potential job candidates, especially in the interest of managing their respective preferences and expectations, was noted as a typical general activity. Furthermore, with regards to specific knowledge and know-how in the search process, general market expertise, intuitive candidate evaluation techniques, as well as the key aim of establishing a personal "fit" between clients and candidates emerged as notable features. Finally, the consultants' role appeared conducive to matching clients and candidates while exercising some more or less purposive influence.

5.1.2 Functional discourse

General activities

In addition to the practical narratives on the features of work practices, outlined in the above entrepreneurial discourse, the respondents' accounts also involved distinctively methodological considerations. While noting the (1) "certain predetermined structures within which we work", one respondent in particular gave a fairly overarching indication of this while contemplating the required skills for and challenges of conducting a successful executive search assignment. These skills encompassed (2) "the methodical, the technical, the specialised" related to the challenges of determining (3) "which is the search field, how do I optimally search, where do I optimally search, what sort of candidates do we need, what is at all to be found?" In other words, researching the executive labour market was underlined as a crucial general activity. All respondent accounts reflected this position as well.

In particular, each of the respondents elaborated on the utilisation of specific market research resources in their work activities. Five main ones were noted, and one

respondent indeed labelled the process of applying them as (4) "the five-channel method". It comprised of:

1. A client's internal candidates and contacts in the respective field
2. The consultants' contacts in the relevant field
3. A systematic market research of external candidates
4. The search firm's contact database
5. Recommendations made by various actors from the other four resources

As could perhaps be expected, most of the accounts in this "functional" discourse focused on the third and fourth points (as seen previously, the second and fifth ones were both featured in the entrepreneurial discourse). Specific resources mentioned by the respondents with regards to market research of external candidates were primarily online resources, such as professional networks, industry publications, as well as industry events, whereas the search firm's database was repeatedly mentioned, but not significantly elaborated on. Two respondents commented:

(5) "We have a large database, but beyond the database – we're not just brokers of CVs, that is, but we rather need to have a comprehensive view into a particular industry. That's why I keep myself up to date, that is, I read newspapers, certain trade magazines, to search for and find people … And of course also the social networks, which are – thank God – very well developed today, and there's virtually nobody who's not on there."

(6) "[You have to] see to it that you visited the trade shows … [and that] you're in the directory, that you're always: 'Service Provider: Executive Search, Human Resource Consulting' ... See to it that you get in the newspaper, in the media."

Specific knowledge and know-how

As can be gathered from the above-described structured market research approach, the conception of specific knowledge and know-how in the functional discourse appeared essentially to draw from standardised, more or less theoretical methods. Ample further indications of this could be found in the respondents' accounts on conducting an executive search search process. Two main themes could be underlined: 1) market expertise, and 2) candidate evaluation methods and aims.

Concerning the perceptions of expertise, elaborated on by three respondents, focus was essentially on specialisation. Two of the respondents reasoned as follows:

(7) "It's important that I know what I'm searching for because I believe that most in our business don't know that at all. And when you're searching … for a company … which has it's headquarters in America, but is looking for a CFO for Europe in Germany, who is reporting to America, then you must automatically know: [you] need US GAAP, you need [German] HGB, IFRS, maybe even a couple others if there has to be a consolidation on country level. I'm sure that many don't know this. It's the same with legal issues. Always difficult, [and] not many know [these]."

(8) "One must know where the candidates come from, it can't just comprise of the network of one person … it's much, much hand-made hard work".

Moreover, regarding research know-how, it should be noted that the comment in excerpt 8 was made while considering a major competitor known for hiring only experienced managers with MBAs and double-degrees from renowned universities as headhunters. In the respondent's words, some in the business (9) "are relatively convinced that they are overqualified for what they do … and they are very theoretical". The two other respondents also talked along similar lines, emphasising the more vocationally conditioned expertise in their work:

(10) "I have certain methods that I have learned in the course of my profession".

(11) "There, [in highly specialised fields], you must have a very, very good researcher so that you get to the people because nobody knows them."

Altogether, however, both such vocational, as well as more industry-specific bases of knowledge appeared crucial. One respondent elaborated on two typical backgrounds of consultants as follows, noting both in-house careers from an entry-level position at consultancies in addition to bringing in managers and experts from other fields:

(12) "In part the person may have … worked for most of his career in consulting and executive search and has grown from there, and secondly it may very easily be people who have worked fifteen to twenty years in the industry, and then change into executive search."

Pertaining to the second theme main theme on specific knowledge and know-how – candidate evaluation methods and aims – the evaluation techniques could be characterised as semi-structured, whereas a key aim in evaluation emerged in establishing the normative suitability of candidates. All respondents had some input on this line of thinking.

The methods outlined focused on semi-structured interviewing techniques. In particular three respondents were vocal about these. Two concepts were most significant in the accounts: "question marks" and "open questions". These represented two more or less concrete procedures in evaluating candidates.

The concept of the "questions marks" was largely a continuation of the intuitive evaluation technique of "listening" addressed by the same respondent in the entrepreneurial discourse. As such, it was essentially the technical side of a critical approach on candidate responses:

(13) Respondent: "Always there, where I have a contradiction, there's a question mark for me. If I have a question mark at the end of a conversation, I put him [the candidate] aside and consider the next day why I have this question mark … If there are no question marks at the end of a conversation, he'll be recommended by me."
(14) Interviewer: "Okay, where do these question marks come from? Do you have certain, kind of, indicators or tests in the process, or how does it work?"
(15) Respondent: "Interviews: you conduct them and you just realise that something isn't right with the CV. Either he keeps something from you, or has already been dismissed, or he's already on garden leave … but still gets to keep the title, and has three months time to find a new job. There's always the question, why is it like that? Why did the company get rid of him? Or when there's a gap of three to four months … And then [the candidate says]: 'Oh yes, I had so many offers, I didn't know what I should do, I just needed more time.' He'll maybe get a question mark. I draw it on the right side of the CV, and if it's still there at the end of the interview, I'll usually ask about it again. If I don't get a satisfactory answer to it, then I don't present the candidate."

The concept of "open questions" appeared primarily geared towards evaluating interviewees' reflexivity. Two respondents commented:

(16) "Often you [as a candidate] have a certain pattern, and you're prepared to present yourself for ten to fifteen minutes and expect certain things. So making an

unexpected conversation is often also a great tool to get honest answers and an honest impression."

(17) "In order to determine how a candidate adapts to situations, to topics, I prefer to work with completely open questions. I explain to the candidate what we're looking for, how the profile is like, what's technically required, and what's required of the person, and ask him then in a completely open question to tell me not only what he's been doing, but also how he's doing it. And to provide me with the transfer effort that he relates his personal, professional experience to the required profile."

(18) "Candidates often know themselves if they suit well into this position. If you really speak honestly with them – and we have very established job descriptions – and if you let them take a look at it, ask for feedback, ask: 'What are your strengths on this, what are your weaknesses, development points?' Then you'll very easily find out if this candidate is suitable for this position or not. It's a very good tool to actually directly confront the candidates with the position."

The general aim of candidate evaluations in the discourse could be identified in terms of establishing the normative suitability of candidates in light of position profiles based on specific "competence models". Each respondent recounted formal credentials, such as education and skills, and other more or less standard expectations as to an individual's career and person, such as salary levels, cultural affiliation and character. Two respondents gave fairly illustrative accounts:

(19) "I naturally have a specification from clients – what are they exactly looking for – … and of course try to find someone, who matches one hundred per cent of the hard facts, that is: educational background, specific experiences, specific turnover responsibilities. That's the first block. The second one is to test the person on … soft skills ... And the third major block, which is moreover difficult, is to determine the fit to the entire corporate culture, corporate identity. I of course also have specifications on that from the company, which of course aren't that easy to grasp, such as five years of sales experience in an international environment."

(20) "A certain type of person is often sought, in English I would call it: 'Progressive career, with ambitions and clear targets, ready to go into conflicts, and able to professionally manage an intercultural environment'."

(21) "I approach people directly from companies of which I know that they operate in a similar way [as the client company, and] which are interesting."

In the talk on what characteristics the consultants were looking for in candidates, the dichotomy of "soft" and "hard" skills, as in the above excerpt 19, found frequent usage. One respondent, in comments also fairly representative of the other respondents, was quite eloquent on what these qualities ultimately boiled down to:

(22) "The optimal case, shall we say, … the stereotype that the companies want is surely fact-based leaders. But they must have a certain risk-taking mentality because they have to be ready to take 'calculated risks' – they call it, very sophisticated. [It] means different [things] in different companies. Gut-based pure – that's not anyone good. To be sure, there always has to be a theory behind it all, [although] you sometimes may want to make a decision only on gut-feeling."

Moreover, the notion of "character", mainly elaborated on by two respondents, essentially revolved around the alignment of certain personality traits with organisational culture. Such personal qualities were notably deemed as more or less given upon reaching mature adulthood and thus of central importance to a successful placement:

(23) "You can always even out deficits in subject-specific expertise through further education, but no personal or character deficits. That's why one mustn't carry out many prominent employment decisions offhand, but rather then really in accordance with an orderly process, and then also with semi-structured interviews, where you on the basis of certain competence models … evaluate candidates after a personal talk."

Role orientation

Two important bases for the role of consultants in functional discourse could be seen in the general activities of researching the executive labour market by utilising specific market research resources, as well as the specific knowledge and know-how in applying structured market research and candidate evaluation techniques. The role of the consultants could accordingly be identified in realising established executive search processes.

Following the prescribed process in screening candidates to arrive at a small number to be ultimately presented to clients was an important aspect to the role. This was an element in every respondent account on the search process. One respondent gave the following general narrative on the structure of the process after a job profile has been

agreed on with clients, while another reflected on some of the limits posed by the structure on candidate selection:

(24) "Once this clarification has taken place, the research gets the assignment to identify and approach suitable candidates … When the candidates' CVs are available, then [the senior consultant decides] with whom the interviews are conducted … We conduct the interviews and determine then after the interviews with what shortlist … we then look to discuss further at the client's."

(25) "The result is that, let's say, even if a really good man would additionally come, you wouldn't include him anymore [on the shortlist]. This could happen. When you've presented five people, and one more who's really good shows up, and you say – 'Wow, that's a bombshell!' – you [still] won't put him in addition."

In accordance with these excerpts, there was a certain perception of the scope of the consultant's role as essentially limited to carrying out search processes for clients. As such, the potential influence of consultants was largely deemphasised in this discourse. Three respondents detailed this in that they framed the responsibility of consultants as primarily residing in the precise fulfilment of clients' explicit assignments:

(26) "In our eyes, we present candidates who are good for the role, [and of] which we have done background checks best we can, and it's always the client who recruits, so they must also bear the responsibility for it."

(27) "[When one] of the board members goes out and says: 'We want to have a board member who's right for us, but also doesn't really bring specialist expertise that complements our existing knowledge'. Is this [the completion of the assignment by the consultant] exertion of influence? I would say yes and no, only just – no. That is, I'd generally say no."

(28) "In some cases, certainly, I think that there is a correlation [in that executive search contributes to the recruitment of certain types of individuals], but it mostly depends on what the clients want. We're of course a service provider at the end of the day."

In conclusion, the functional discourse on the features of work practices appeared to largely revolve around structured procedures in executive search. The utilisation of specific market research resources in researching executive labour markets was identified as a main general activity. Moreover, specific knowledge and know-how in the executive search process were essentially represented in terms of specialised market expertise, semi-structured candidate evaluation techniques, and the aim to

evaluate the normative fit between clients and candidates. Lastly, the perception of the consultants' role could be characterised as carrying out established executive search processes in accordance with clients' assignments.

5.1.3 Professional discourse

General activities

The respondents' accounts on their work activities could be seen to comprise both fairly matter-of-fact and procedural aspects, as described in the entrepreneurial and functional discourses respectively. Beyond these, explicitly moral considerations on work practices were elaborated on as well. Each respondent made ample reference to specific principles in their work activities. Among such guiding principles mentioned were "integrity", "morality", "confidentiality", "neutrality" and "fairness".

Taken together, the principles emerged as integral in terms of sustaining market stability, i.e. having a sustainable working relationship with both clients and candidates. A climate of confidence was deemed vital for receiving search mandates from clients, gaining access to candidates, and for maintaining service quality. Moreover, this striving towards trust and efficiency was especially framed in opposition of what one respondent labelled (1) "black sheep in the industry". These were described as small firms, which would cut corners by e.g. disregarding the confidentiality of candidates and compete on project pricing, while also discounting quality standards in the process. Two respondents elaborated on these issues as follows:

(2) "There are very many players in the industry, very many small [ones] …, which you might sometimes even call 'cowboys on the market', who may not much play according to ethical rules and according to the integrity, formality, and confidentiality rules that we run. And it's maybe a problem and maybe sometimes makes candidates sceptical, as they may lump the whole industry together if they've had the wrong kind of experience before. So it's a special challenge, and all clients don't understand this either … But it's a very important thing, this with ethics, especially with the credibility towards the candidate market."

(3) “The price pressure [in the economic downturn] hasn’t maybe been so good, but this kind of thing always happens, [and what’s important is] that you just have to hold to your principles: delivering quality and keeping prices up.”

(4) “You really have to be properly positioned in the executive search [market] segment if you want to be recognised as … a brand in terms of a quality mark on the market.”

Specific knowledge and know-how

Specific knowledge and know-how on the executive search process in this discourse could be seen to rely on considerations on professional standards. They mainly pertained to the theme of candidate evaluation methods and aims. Whereas the perceptions on evaluation methods were both critical and constructive, the aims related to promoting certain values and in establishing a “cultural fit” between clients and candidates.

A professional approach to candidate evaluation was deemed to necessitate particular sensibility and far-sightedness. Two respondents thought on such a reflective approach as follows:

(5) “[You] think in the first place [when entering into executive search] that it surely can’t be that hard to find someone who fits well. Now, what I've learned … is that finding a suitable candidate – not the best one, but a suitable candidate – for the position … is a highly complex matter, a task, in which you have to be aware of that you’re subject to many perceptual influences, that is, something like the personal human factor.”

(6) “One of the challenges is that many people come to us and play very interested and motivated for exactly that position. They may not react, as we’d like: that this is a contact – the two of us – and this is a case we're working on. And we're here to look if this is matching now – this candidate's ambitions and the culture of the company – or not ... And that's maybe what one’s learned over the years, that you immediately actually have such a dialogue and don’t just play a project with one person, but go into a [relationship]. I always say to each candidate that it’s a long-time relationship that we’re establishing here.”

A third respondent moreover touched on a specific methodical concern in the “googling” of candidates, i.e. using online resources to procure information on persons. This was seen to present an ethical dilemma as candidates might

consequently be rejected due to information without bearing on a job position at hand. The respondent exemplified this with that a client had rejected a candidate because of the person having made a critical public statement regarding a previous superior's abuse of a leading position for personal gain:

(7) "This was googled by the lady [the hiring manager], and thus she [the candidate] was rejected as she [the hiring manager] said: 'If she indirectly exposes the boss from behind then she'll do that with me too'. But that then again means that she [the manager] also has skeletons in her closet. Therefore – very difficult."

As to aims in candidate evaluation, the realisation of specific values in placements was particularly pertinent. Notions such as "diversity", "empathy" and "family" were discussed in the responses on sought-after qualities in candidates. Two respondents thought as follows on the realisation of such values in placements:

(8) "When you take this [an employer brand] as a basis, then you, as an executive search consultant, also have the issue to direct these fundamental questions to the company: 'For which values do you stand and what does this mean for the staffing of the top positions, that is, which personalities, which experiential background, which professionalism is ultimately suitable in view of the set of values, as the company has defined for itself?'"

(9) "It's my personal conviction – and I'll also say that openly – that we need a female quota [on corporate boards] ... I also think on the topic of diversity – there you also moreover have the cultural issues – ... [that] diversity on the management committee of a company is much more conducive to success than only having the people with the same experience there."

(10) "[In the evaluation of candidates' character] personal aspects also play a strong role: the origin of the candidate, the family environment, and the personal lifestyle. Is there a family? Are there children? I'm personally among those who say: 'Candidates with family and with children as a rule have a higher social competence than those without because they're time and again earthed due to family, due to children, due to domestic conflicts, [and] due to questions of meaning which the children pose'."

In addition to abiding by certain values more or less imperatively, establishing a "cultural fit" based on mutually acknowledged values between clients and candidates moreover appeared to be fairly central, as one respondent put it:

(11) "[For us it comes down to] assessing the cultural fit of the candidates, and to make the candidates aware of the values for which they stand, or the values which

drive them in their economic actions, and if that in turn is compatible with the company."

(12) "I of course also try to not only identify, but also to influence certain standards at the client because I'm convinced that it's in the client's interest to hire value-bound candidates rather than the purely monetary incentivised – because they're only concerned with inflating corporate performance indicators on the one hand, and then with securing themselves a maximum of income."

Role orientation

Taking the main activities of sustaining market stability, confidence and quality standards, the critical and constructive approaches on candidate evaluation methods, and the aims of promoting certain values in the executive search process as a basis, it could be argued that the perception of the consultant's role in this discourse essentially revolved around principled recruitment advisory. As such, a key concern emerged in embracing responsibility in an advisory capacity as a partner to hiring managers. Each respondent also gave some specific indication of such a conception, and one of them captured the role fairly correspondingly:

(13) "As a consultant, if you take the advisory role seriously – just refusing to be shoved into supplier status – then it should also be made clear to the client that he's actually running contrary to his own interests and the corporate interest with a, to put it mildly, narrowly defined placement strategy."

As in this excerpt, a rather morally aware stance towards assignments could also be found in numerous other accounts. Much emphasis was placed on a consultant's integrity and responsibility. In terms of personal integrity, there was some concern about the potentially uncritical involvement of consultants in search processes. Three respondents commented:

(14) "I think every consultant, who in the course of a mandating process feels that he's really just the 'powder tin', that is, is actually only being assigned for creating an alibi and for the supposed professionalisation of a staffing process, is well advised to decline there."

(15) "It [neutrality] is especially important in our job. We are speaking here of the international department: to have a certain open-mindedness, to speak several languages, to be courageous, that is, to present one's perception clearly to the clients."

(16) ”[It] takes some guts and experience as well to dare to do that [challenge a client company], and not only present candidates who come from the expected, exactly expected line of requirements.”

The responsibility of consultants in recruitment processes was accordingly emphasised. Drawing from this, the scope of a consultant’s advisory role was conceived of in relatively wide-ranging terms. Three respondents provided the following input:

(17) “Sometimes there is … the wish – it often happens when there are internal candidates at the company for which a search is being done – that we achieve a certain objectification in that we conduct management audits for the candidates who are in the final selection.”

(18) “One can certainly consider if we are partly responsible [for unsuccessful placements], and we of course have guarantee clauses [to resume searches] in our contracts if something very unexpected comes up, which very rarely happens.”

(19) “If you will, executive search must have a certain disciplining effect on the recruitment policy of the company. This is not easy to implement because there’s naturally also the perception on the side of the client: ‘You’re a service provider, you’re a supplier, why do you want to be a thorn in the side?’ … But I think such a critical dialogue between the principal and the agent is more productive for all parties than just being present with a note pad.”

To conclude, the professional discourse on the features of work practices could be seen to place a high regard on morals in executive search. Sustaining market stability, confidence and quality standards could be noted as the main general activities. Furthermore, with regards to specific knowledge and know-how in the search process, critical and constructive approaches to candidate evaluation methods could be identified. Also, the promotion of certain values in candidate evaluation and the establishment of a cultural fit between clients and candidates were marked features. Finally, consultants’ professional role was characterised in terms of principled and responsible recruitment advisory.

5.1.4 Conceptual discourse

General activities

A fourth discourse in the consultants' responses on their work activities could be identified in distinctively theoretical concerns. As could be seen in the other three discourses, more or less frequent use was made of specific concepts for framing pertinent issues in executive search. These included, among others, "gut feeling", "competence model" and "cultural fit" in the entrepreneurial, functional and professional discourses respectively. These concepts largely denoted applications of theories in practice. In addition to these practical uses, concepts were also reasoned on in more explicitly abstract terms, primarily by two of the respondents.

Altogether, these "conceptual" accounts on work activities were mainly concerned with the theoretical reflection on concepts for making sense of pertinent topics with a more or less direct bearing on the practices of executive search. In other words, providing analytical input on recruitment challenges emerged as a central interest. Two respondents exemplified this as follows:

(1) "For us, as an executive search firm, if we want to bring about competitive differentiation, it's important to recognise these trends [on corporate values] and to also discuss the trends with the clients. That's why we've also, for instance, initiated the decision-making group on renewable energies …, where managers from the field of renewables can get together to discuss the trends in their industry. And that's also what I mean with this substantive claim, the question is always: … do you first of all relate to the [candidate] profile critically, think about it, and present a critical counterpoint to some degree?"

(2) "I believe that I would've had to take some additional steps if I hadn't been academically so strongly involved with hermeneutics, with interpretative sciences, that is."

Specific knowledge and know-how

As can be gathered from the above work activities, the conception of specific knowledge and know-how in the conceptual discourse was extensively grounded in theory. The respondents' input on candidate evaluation methods and aims could also

be seen to reflect this. Whereas evaluation methods pertained to the uses of analytical distinctions, the aims were framed in terms of specific ideals in placements.

Two respondents elaborated as follows on analytical concerns related to evaluation techniques:

(3) "Why did it come to that? One the one hand … , [one], so to speak, understands the history of the position a little bit … On the other hand, the main part is to work out what is to be expected in the future: what is going to be contributed, initiated and implemented for the company from this position?"

(4) "I think the most important insight in the evaluation of candidates is that the question on character ideally takes a central place, and that you capture the motivational structure of the candidates: what drives them …, with what motivation do they generally go through life?"

Regarding the aims in candidate evaluation, definitions of certain ideals in placements were put forward. These were essentially framed in view of the future of executive search. Within the topic, the internationality and cultural sensibility of candidates were underlined as particular ideals, as the above two respondents explicated:

(5) "I'd generally say that there are trends to the effect that autocratic decision-makers are a little bit on the retreat, and that we rather have managers, who are able to adapt to different cultural market developments and other things – that internationalisation has to a certain extent [steered] the [management] profiles in this direction."

(6) "This [the challenge posed by demographic change] also means that the executive search processes also need to be more internationally oriented in the future. That is, you no more only search in the national market, but you also fill the position through at least European – partly even global – research, that is, in terms of a best in class for given assignments."

(7) "Of course, the challenge is – keyword: values – [that] ultimately you have intercultural management bodies. So, with Africans, with Asians with Europeans, with South Americans, with North Americans. To be sure, they all live in this world, but they have different mentalities, they have different socialisation, different religions, and what will be interesting is: what is the common foundation of the company?"

The concern with diversity was additionally theorised by one of the respondents. In the respondent's view, a placement process should ideally incorporate (8) "an

innovation aspect, that is, personnel innovation by means of executive search". As such, while making reference to a book by a management scholar, an additional ideal in executive placements was to further innovation by facilitating so-called "hot spots" at client companies. The respondent commented further:

(9) "The company has an interest in diversity at the management level because when I reproduce diversity, I get diverse impulses for the development of the company. I bring providers of ideas together and create 'hot spots'. And whenever people with different experiences, perspectives, personalities and character come together, a 'hot spot' emerges, and 'hot spots' ultimately originate innovation. You can write down this book on the topic: [*Hot Spots: Why Some Teams, Workplaces, and Organisations Buzz with Energy – and Others Don't* by Lynda Gratton, Professor of Management Practice at London Business School]."

Role orientation

Drawing from the general activities of theoretical reflection, and the specific knowledge and know-how in making analytical distinctions and defining ideal types in placements, the role of consultants could be identified in providing analytical input on recruitment practices.

As such, the role could be conceived of as strategically orientated. This was in particular perceived to entail that consultants occupy a key position in clients' recruitment activities, and that they possess a vast knowledge base of industry practices, i.e. ways in which other companies have addressed specific issues. Two respondents elaborated as follows:

(10) "You are also a trusted advisor in the position [of an executive search consultant], that is, you are a strategic sparring partner for each client and are so in a certain external key position, which, however, is very important for the company in terms of finding top talent for prominent leadership positions."

(11) "I think this aspiration has always … helped me on, that is, being able to also signal to the client: I know the industry, I know the trends, I also know your issues, I know your problems, and I also know individuals in the business who currently come into question for certain positions."

(12) "As part of our briefings, we indeed give the client input on the structures, disposition, processes, [and] organisational forms of competitors."

(13) "How are similar things [as at a client company] structured in other companies, or what does the market offer – which are the candidates' perceptions? As a recruiter, you just have so very many best practice examples in your head, or also worst-case examples …, and you of course try to advise the company as best you can."

In sum, the conceptual discourse on the features of work practices could be characterised as revolving around theoretical dimensions of executive search. A main activity could be identified in theoretical reflection on concepts related to practices of executive search. Moreover, specific knowledge and know-how was emergent in terms of analytical distinctions in evaluating position profiles and candidates, and the aim of defining ideals in candidate placements. Finally, the perception of the role orientation of consultants could be argued to revolve around strategic recruitment advisory.

5.2 Motives of practices in executive search

In this section, the motives of work practices are addressed in accordance with the four discourses outlined in the previous section. Within each discourse, accounts on two different dimensions are noted: 1) rationalisation, concerning motivational factors of work activities; and 2) legitimation, pertaining to contextual factors of the consultants' roles.

5.2.1 Entrepreneurial discourse

Rationalisation

As seen in Subsection 5.1.1, the entrepreneurial accounts on the features of work practices could be characterised as distinctively hands-on, among others emphasising the management of clients' and candidates' preferences and expectations. The outcomes of the work activities were essentially conceived of as matching the two parties in recruitments. In other words, completing clients' assignments by placing a job candidate could largely be understood in terms of satisfying different interests.

Further indications of interest could also be distinguished in the discourse, related to both personal and social interests.

Personal interests were framed in both fairly material and immaterial terms. Regarding the material dimension, three respondents referred to the relatively clear-cut results of work activities as a source of motivation. That is, the fact that the success or, in some cases, failure of the consultants' executive search assignments were visible in about three months time gave the activities a rather clear horizon, as one of the respondents put it. Another of them commented analogously:

(1) Interviewer: "Why is it [executive search] important?"
(2) Respondent: "Because in executive search, you're an immediate problem solver. That is, the perceptibility of professional effort is extremely pronounced."

Concerning the immaterial dimension, two respondents elaborated on their motivation as arising from their personal aptitude and that the character of the work was personally rewarding. They explained respectively:

(3) "I'm good at it [executive search] and feel that I handle it very well."

(4) "It's extremely eventful here. You have different projects, different industries, [and] different focus from each person."

Social interests were notably conceived of in terms of a long-term business commitment with clients, as noted by two respondents:

(5) "You advise the company in the long term with the ultimate goal of retaining the company as a client for a longer time, and to also develop [them] successfully because successful clients also make us successful."

(6) "Unlike our colleagues in management consulting, who then disappear from the company after the consulting process and sometimes the great consulting papers even end up in the drawer and are never implemented, with us it's like that that when we hire managing directors, when we hire executives … it often means that we … subsequently also accompany them for years in that we carry out search assignments for them."

Legitimation

The concern with clients' long term interests suggested above could be seen to provide a certain basis for the legitimation of the consultants' role as well, as more or less correspondingly framed by one respondent:

(7) "You legitimate yourself through the results that you achieve in the end, that is, through success, through experience, through reputation."

Beyond this individual concern, a major theme on legitimation could be identified in terms of the perceived practical necessity of specialisation in executive recruitment. Four out of the five respondents provided largely corresponding accounts on this while considering the reasons for why clients externalise their recruitments to consultants. The status of headhunters as a last resort after a client company had already exhausted other options, such as job adverts and contacts in their respective industry, was underlined in this. Consultants were deemed to possess superior recruiting know-how and candidate access compared with clients' HR departments or corporate boards, which essentially lacked the possibility for direct approaches to passive prospective candidates currently in the employ of other companies. Three respondents related to this point as follows:

(8) "The companies don't usually have the time for that [executive search], or the specialist know-how … HR departments in companies have so many other things to do, and the companies fetching us often don't have the possibility for direct approaches."

(9) "In the top level it's like that that the know-how on the personnel or HR-management side which exists at the company can't, shouldn't and mustn't be used to search for one's own executives. That's at least in Germany, in public companies, always the task of the supervisory board, or also usually that of the chairman, who, however, doesn't have a functioning HR-department for himself, but is rather effectively the chairman of a control committee."

(10) "You can get the added value quickly, admittedly pay a lot of money, but effectively, as quickly as possible, [get] the quality set in the right place. And as a result they'll [the clients] always get back to recruiters because they'll never get certain positions filled [on their own]."

A particular example with regards to the necessity of specialised recruiters was moreover that of companies looking for personnel outside their own country of origin:

(11) "When they [the clients] go abroad, they have no network and not really structures and processes, so then they like to give it [the recruitment assignment] to a consultant, who has experience and know-how in finding people abroad."

In conclusion, the points of view on motives in the entrepreneurial discourse appeared to have bases in rather concrete interests. Both personal and social interests could be seen to underlie rationalisations. Regarding personal interests, the directness and tangibility of work efforts, as well as the fulfilment experienced in personal abilities and the content of work were touched on. Concerning social interests, nurturing a long-term business commitment to clients was noteworthy. Moreover, legitimation for the consultants' role was framed as primarily residing in the practical necessity of specialisation in executive recruitment. This was in particular due to consultants' advantages in terms of recruiting know-how and candidate access for positions, which companies were unable to effectively fill on their own.

5.2.2 Functional discourse

Rationalisation

The "functional" role orientation of consultants identified in Subsection 5.1.2 on the features of work practices was framed within the scope of carrying out established executive search processes. Work activities could in other words be seen to largely revolve around meeting demand from the client side in accordance with specific search assignments. As such, the realisation of search processes appeared essentially rule-based in terms of motives. Additional input in line with this reasoning was most notable in the accounts of three respondents. Both personal and social dimensions to the rules could be distinguished.

Personal rules could be mainly seem to draw from market research methods as well as specialised market expertise, which were notable among the features of practices in

the discourse. A certain knowledge base was largely indicated as indispensable for carrying out search processes, among others also mentioned in excerpts 7 to 11 in Subsection 5.1.2. One respondent made more explicit reference to it in the following:

(1) "Especially in times of economic change, I'd say, many think that they can suddenly also now do executive search. This contributes to that there are maybe players on the market whose processes aren't according to standards which you have in dealing with people: with personal, confidential matters, company internal but also personal. In this, there is reason for criticism, I'd say. But companies like [the respondent's company], which really work according to high moral standards – there, not."

(2) "How does a recruitment consultant legitimate himself? First of all, [being] a recruitment consultant is a profession … We're first of all of course certified as an executive search firm to do things the way we do – just as a doctor also carries out surgeries."

Pertaining to the identified social rules, the argumentation essentially rested on a perceived economic necessity of there being intermediaries in external recruitment. Considerable weight was consequently put on what one respondent termed the (3) "impulse of the market", i.e. the relevance of economic utility and market demand. Three respondents commented on this form of market-orientation:

(4) "I'm doing this job because I'm convinced that there is a great demand for what we are doing, and that the profession creates added value for companies, that is, the question of outsourcing these tasks to recruiters is a very important one."

(5) "The market is currently consolidating, I'd say. There are the big players, which are also operating internationally, but there is also – just as there are diverse companies and diverse needs – a diverse offering."

(6) "I wouldn't say that executive search has a higher, let's say, socio-economic or some other factor saying that it's important because I help people or that I'm helping society move forward … I think this is an industry that has grown simply out of practical reasons – that there are less qualified employees than companies want and that there are companies struggling to get these good people."

(7) "Literally, you don't do all this out of social factors – you should make money, that's just the way it is."

Legitimation

In addition to being a motivational factor for the consultants' work activities, the above standpoints on a professional knowledge base and the perceived economic necessity of labour market intermediation also appeared to be of central importance regarding legitimation. All respondents indeed had some input on this note. The conception of legitimation mainly emerged in three themes. These pertained to the contribution of executive search: 1) for the functioning of the labour market, 2) as a best practice in recruiting, and 3) as a solution to contemporary recruitment challenges. The bases of legitimacy could consequently be seen as mainly rooted in relatively utilitarian, normative and socio-economic argumentation respectively.

The accounts on the first theme – the contribution for the functioning of labour markets – related to both clients' and candidates' utility. A central contention was that using the process of executive search entailed several efficiency advantages over clients' own recruitment efforts (in addition to the more practical advantages noted in the above entrepreneurial discourse). Among these were the comprehensiveness in quantity and quality of candidates as well as responsiveness and flexibility on the labour market. In short, executive search was to conceived of as (8) "faster, more effective, [and] unproblematic". Two other respondents also further elaborated on this contribution:

(9) "[We provide] a larger population of candidates who are placed in a cross-comparison, and so they [the clients] have a sophisticated benchmarking."

(10) "[Clients are provided with] a systematic market research, and thereby a kind of 'dragnet investigation'."

(11) "Example: we are now looking for the all-in-one panacea, which maybe doesn't exist on the market, so you instead adapt the search parameters a bit and communicate this accordingly to the client."

As be gathered from these excerpts, executive search was essentially put forward as contributing to objectivity and meritocracy in the labour market, which was also seen as advantageous for candidates. In particular one respondent was very emphatic about

the perceived openness of the labour market, and made the following comments while opposing the thought of consultants exercising excessive influence on placements:

(12) "I honestly don't believe that the executive search consultant has such an influence on this [professional] network, and that's the good thing – it's kind of self-regulating ... And you [as a candidate] can carefully consider what you present on such a profile as LinkedIn or XING. It's all free. And it's ultimately nothing else but competition."

The second main theme – executive search as a best practice in recruiting – emerged as a rather normative form of legitimation. From this point of view, executive search was put forward as a form of matter of course in recruitment. The bases for this were mainly to be found in organisational policies and corporate regulation, i.e. more or less formal rules. Three respondents had input on this with the following thinking appearing fairly typical:

(13) "In the same way as this control committee [the supervisory board] makes use of an auditing firm on the issues of the financial statement, the control committee also makes use of an executive search firm for executive placements."

(14) "If it's really political, that you just say: 'Okay, I don't want to vouch for the decision because I already know that this can actually go bad because that which we've been looking for doesn't exist on the market'. And he [the hiring manager] can't be successful. If it's things like this, that is, purely political aspects of the company … to 'save one's own ass', to ensure that it doesn't come to that that my own position is called into question, then I do think so [that there is evasion of responsibility by hiring managers]."

(15) "In general, it's sufficient for managing directors or also board members … to be able to say: 'A professional process has been conducted here – done. We've looked at so and so many people … and have chosen the best one of them'."

In the third theme on addressing contemporary recruitment challenges, the justifications for executive search were to be found in a fairly wide-ranging socio-economic perspective. Among the most important concepts used in this context were "demographic change", "shortage of skilled labour", "diversity" and "globalisation". Taken together, these states of affairs were seen to bring about an accentuated need to conduct ever-broader searches, even beyond national borders, as the ideal candidate pool was perceived to be difficult to assemble more locally. Three respondents, above

all, had ample input on these issues. Talking primarily of the two former concepts, they voiced the following views:

(16) "I for instance call a candidate to tell him about my terrific position, which I have to fill, and he says: 'You know what, I already signed [a new job contract] yesterday and you're the fifth one to call me' ... And I do this with many of his colleagues, and get to hear this reply very often."

(17) "Earlier you approached ten people and thus had three to four candidates. Today, you call 500 in order to get the same amount."

(18) "I think that the demographic change naturally plays into the hands of our profession … because companies very quickly reach the limit with their own recruitment mechanisms and ultimately don't acquire the quantity and quality of candidates, which they need to get for a high-value placement."

Dealing more specifically with diversity and globalisation, two of the former and an additional respondent elaborated:

(19) "Diversity is becoming more and more important. We have clients who come to us and try to get penalties in our contracts if we don't present women in a recruitment process."

(20) "Diversity, that is, now it's like that that companies increasingly of course also for example want women on the corporate board, which for a long time wasn't an issue. Thus, it's of course then a challenge for us to find such women, women who for a long time weren't promoted – where should they suddenly come from?"

(21) "Globalisation, that is, that you increasingly look for people, who, when they for example work for an international global player, also have to be increasingly internationally orientated and networked – keyword: 'matrix structures', even across borders."

(22) "[In the future], you fill the position via at least European but partly also global research, that is, in terms of a best in class for given assignments."

To conclude, the perceptions of the motives of practices in the functional discourse could be characterised as based on more or less formal rules and norms. First, rationalisation stemmed from a knowledge base on specialised market research and recruitment methods. As such, a sense of occupational awareness could be implied. Moreover, a social dimension basis for rationalisation appeared grounded in a

perceived economic necessity of intermediaries in external placements to address market demand. Second, three main themes on legitimation were framed in utilitarian, normative and socio-economic contributions of executive search respectively. In the utilitarian sense, efficiency and transparency in labour markets were put forward as principal contributions. Normatively, legitimation was based on organisational policies and formal regulation with political concerns at the fore. Against a socio-economic background, legitimacy broadly rested on the contribution to perceived recruitment challenges of the times. As such, executive search emerged as a solution to several concerns pertaining to the composition of candidate pools.

5.2.3 Professional discourse

Rationalisation

As seen in the "professional" discourse on the features of practices in Subsection 5.1.3, the maintenance of market stability, confidence and quality standards were identified as prevalent general activities. Values thus essentially emerged as pertinent motives for activities. Accordingly, both personal and social values could be gathered in the discourse. Although all respondents contributed to this line of reasoning, one was especially outspoken.

Related to personal values, a consultant's personal integrity in staying true to guiding principles was put forward as imperative (excerpts 14 to 16 in the discourse on the consultants' role orientation could also be seen as indicative of this). This was echoed in most accounts. Two respondents reflected the stances as follows:

(1) "I've always strived to work with a commitment towards certain values in my career. Above all, to also communicate these values to colleagues, and to show them appreciation, while not necessarily taking myself all too seriously in this … because I produce another kind of motivation through this than if I'd reason and act hierarchically."

(2) "I think that this is the most important insight for me [in evaluating and nominating candidates]: to act true to character, to search for character, and to also entrench character with the client."

(3) “There aren’t many consultants who say no, there are enough consultants who do all projects, even though they maybe aren’t at all qualified”.

As could perhaps be expected, the professional discourse was more characterised by social rather than personal values. A high consciousness of work activities being done in an advisory capacity in the best interest of clients was central to the argumentation. Three respondents elaborated accordingly on such “added value”:

(4) “You have a clear search assignment, a clear mission, which is to be fulfilled, and you’re ultimately … not only a supplier, but also a consultant to the company, that is, you influence the position profile … , you influence the search strategy, and you solve their problem in filling a top position, and thus you make a direct value added contribution for the company.”

(5) “Of course, on the one hand, the [executive search] firm is trying to comply to the desired requirements of the client company, but also I think the executive search consultant must be in the position to be tough enough to also challenge the client company. So this … plays a role where I would say that the specific search firm or consultant can make a difference and … give his clients added value.“

(6) “Precisely at a certain hierarchical level, it’s important that you seek such a third opinion – that is, from a qualified executive search consultant, who advises the company impartially, neutrally once more, in terms of added value for the company.”

A more specific striving was furthermore the contribution to market stability – as prominently noted on general activities in the discourse – against the backdrop of specific trends. One respondent emphasised the importance of this while making reference to both ambiguous business models in the “New Economy” at the time of the dot-com bubble, and the so-called “Peter Principle”, according to which “in a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence“ (Peter & Hull 1969, 25), i.e. that people overreach beyond what their abilities would reasonably allow. The respondent essentially crystallised the standpoint on opportunistic trends in the following, while another appeared to largely agree:

(7) “As an executive search consultant, I can participate in this [opportunistic trend] and say: ‘Exactly, yes – I want to fuel this gold rush mood by providing compatible profiles’. Or, I can sit back and say – Keyword: ‘[the respondent’s firm]’; Slogan: ‘human values for business’.”

(8) “This is, I think, for me … a reason not only why I’m in the line of business, but also why I’m at [the respondent’s firm], because we’re trying to resist exactly this

trend [as implied in the Peter Principle] and also, as a conservative consultancy, to set a counterpoint."

(9) "Times of crisis are also very dynamic times and very, I'd say, promising times, where the recruiter also does some good when he advises the company to the effect that one for instance leads a counter-cyclical personnel policy … Companies that deal with their personnel long-term are better advised than those that do 'hire and fire'."

Legitimation

A morally steadfast approach to executive search services, as reflected in a number of the above statements in the professional discourse, can also be indicated to lie at the core of the argumentation on legitimation. Two main themes can be underlined: 1) the contribution of executive search practices for the professionalisation of corporate management, in particular as contrasted with past recruitment practices; and 2) the responsibility for corporate performance and recruitment practices beyond a consultant's direct actions.

Regarding the first theme on the professionalisation of management, an important premise for legitimation could be seen in past recruitment practices. Indeed, hiring managers were deemed as potentially unable to hire on wholly neutral or meritocratic grounds:

(10) "The top positions were very much filled in a network-driven way [in the past] … You brought 'buddies' into the function. You often sought the same thing – yes, because you perceive yourself in your professional work and absolutise yourself to a degree, and this leads to that 'birds of a feather flock together'."

The contributions of executive search, reliant on established processes and the professionalism of consultants, were thus noted in professionalising corporate management. This standpoint was strongly reflected in the accounts of three respondents:

(11) "The utilisation of the executive search platform results, from my point of view, in a certain objectification of the composition of management ... And thus there is a professionalisation in the entire placement process."

(12) "More open, flexible, open-minded, mobile … yes, mental and local, regional mobility as an increased property in management."

(13) "[The composition of management] has been changed, indeed, it's been professionalised by us. Yes, the professionalism with which such placements are made when intensely and well advised by a consulting firm [increases] …, and therefore, I'd say, a lot has certainly changed in the last thirty years."

With regards to the second theme on assuming responsibility for corporate performance and recruitment practices, legitimation could be seen to stem from the assumed wide-ranging consequences of consultants' actions, something also partly related to in terms of consultants' socio-economic contribution concerning functional legitimation. The same respondent, who also had most input regarding rationalisations, elaborated on this extensively:

(14) "The better I'm positioned in the executive segment, the more creative my managers. The more dedicated the managers and the more successful they are in their personal recruiting, the greater the quantum leap for the company in the future."

(15) "I must take care to anchor as strong personalities as possible in management because only really strong personalities allow other strong personalities. That is, true to the principle, the fundamental insight: 'first class hires first class, second class hires third class'."

(16) "Precisely in this position [of the executive search consultant] and with the quality of the recruitment the, so to speak, war on the market is determined."

In sum, the conceptions of motives reflected in the above discourse appeared firmly based in morals. Firstly, rationalisation had both a personal and a social anchoring. Personally, a consultant's integrity in relation to a professional value base was emphasised. Socially, clients' added value as stemming from consultants' critical and principled advisory, especially against the backdrop of economic trends, was elaborated on. Furthermore, a take on legitimation could be perceived in the argumentation on the contribution of established executive search practices to professionalising management. The assumption of responsibility for consultants' actions on corporate performance and clients' own recruitment practices was moreover touched on.

5.2.4 Conceptual discourse

Rationalisation

The "conceptual" discourse on general work activities in Subsection 5.1.4 had its main emphasis on the consultants' theoretical reflection related to practices of executive search. Motives in the discourse could accordingly be distinguished in fairly intellectual terms. Philosophical considerations, largely framing work activities in rational terms against more or less ethical social premises appeared to be most prominent in this regard.

Regarding such philosophical stances, many potentially relevant considerations have already been touched on in the discourse on professional motives. There, a rather strong value-based anchoring could be marked in the principles of personal integrity, as well as social stability, especially in opposition of opportunistic trends. Thus, a source of work motivation was indicated in a given view on one's actions and on societal developments at large in the discourse. In addition to the professional motives, two respondents also had more particular conceptual input on their motives.

While enumerating a number of recent economic and political crises, the dot-com bubble, the financial and the Eurozone debt crises among them, one of the respondents reasoned that (1) "these are all crises that pose … fundamental questions in the direction of economic and political action". Such questions on purpose were further seen to have consequences for recruitments and careers at large by one respondent:

(2) "These crises program, so to speak, the personal navigation system for life decisions – who are my employers, who are my business partners … ? Then you have the question – will I let myself be corrupted, or do I stay true to myself and stand for certain values and ultimately also seek out the company that stands for these values … and business partners in daily life, who stand for these values? And then you arrive very quickly to the topic … on the canon of values within the employer brand – what does the company stand for, also with regards to corporate culture and values?"

On a related note, two further respondents similarly linked executive search to wider social motives:

(3) “It [executive search] has a wide-ranging social function, if you’d like to see it that way.”

(4) “I think empathy is necessary [as a property in management], yes. But it doesn’t just concern managers, but holds true for a humane society.”

(5) “There is nothing, nothing worse, I think, both personally for an individual and for a company than having people sitting in positions, where they don’t belong. Much profit is just squandered and losses are also potentially made when you feel unchallenged or overwhelmed, or sit in a position that, I’d say, no longer meets the demands of the market – that is, keyword: ‘technical development of the market’.”

Legitimation

The “conceptual” role orientation of consultants in providing strategic input in line with best practices could be indicated as reliant on specific bases of legitimation. Two themes appear particularly noteworthy in this line of reasoning: 1) the theoretical basis of consultants’ role in various concepts; and 2) consultant’s contribution in creating awareness of developments and solutions in recruiting.

Regarding the first theme, the role of consultants could be seen as justified against the backdrop of several theoretical concepts. This has perhaps most clearly been previously related to in terms of functional legitimation in Subsection 5.2.2, where reference was made to major concepts, such as “demographic change”, “shortage of skilled labour”, “diversity” and “globalisation”. There, a socio-economic contribution by consultants was indicated. In other words, pertaining to such concepts, executive search could be validated as legitimate in theory. Two respondents made further theoretical reference to such concepts in the following accounts on particular challenges in executive search. The concept of a “war for talent”, a metaphor for describing an increase in competition for recruiting and retaining talented employees (Michaels et al. 2001, 1), featured as a notable addition.

(6) “It’s quite clear that for certain fields there simply aren’t enough potential applicants or interested parties. So, keyword: ‘demographic change’. It’s certainly also the competition on the market, in that approached highly qualified candidates may already have several opportunities to change. So, that is, simply keyword: ‘war for talents’.”

(7) “In the increasingly scarce personnel markets, it will be crucial for companies to generate commitment in the direction of their top talents in the future – that is, to tie and develop them at the company as long-term as possible.”

(8) “Ultimately, we must take care to precisely through diversity – through diversity precisely in management – enable the friction to arise where providers of ideas and realisers of ideas meet … and from this process you ultimately get innovation, entrepreneurial development [and] entrepreneurial momentum. And executive search can of course directly influence on this with … an active market research [and] an active approach of key personnel.”

The second theme on consultants’ contribution in terms of creating awareness of developments and solutions in recruiting has been touched on with regards to the role orientation of consultants in the conceptual discourse. However, one respondent also addressed the theme more explicitly in light of legitimation.

The respondent saw a major corporate trend in that companies were becoming more attentive of the (9) “ethical dimensions of managerial actions”. This was in particular the case regarding initiatives to develop work incentives in addition to compensation, job security and further training in order to acquire and retain key employees. Positioning work around a specific higher purpose was underlined. Thus, the respondent viewed companies as being increasingly compelled to provide statements on principles in line with the question (10) “What is our contribution here to the challenges of the times?” In more specific terms:

(11) “I think that’s a major trend, to principally develop a professional ethic, which is a strategy component, but also a confidence factor for companies. There is also an author, who addresses this topic somewhat more intensively. If you’ll have a look into this publication – it’s Professor Gertrud Höhler.”

(12) “One has to also regard these issues under the premise of globalisation, and the international exchange relationships in terms of goods, capital, services, but also personnel – they’re of course expanding. And the key question in view of future trends is indeed: will there be a kind of universal ethic around the globe?”

Drawing from these excerpts, a basis of legitimation was to be found in fairly intellectual discourse. The respondent largely summarised the point as follows:

(13) “For me it’s always important – that’s why I also organise [an annual client conference] – that we, as recruiters, define our substantive claim to also be involved in these topics of the future [on professional ethics and sustainable

development] and to also provide answers to them. And this also in critical dialogue with the clients in the form of such forums that we create."

In conclusion, the perspective on motives of practices in the above accounts appeared to have many bases in theory. Rationalisation could be seen to rely on philosophical points of view on the significance of fundamental values in recruiting and their wider societal implications. Finally, legitimation was framed in light of socio-economic concepts as well as consultants' contribution in creating awareness of developments and solutions in recruiting.

6 Conclusion

The focus of this study has been placed on the main research question on how executive search consultants make sense of their work practices. Specifically, two sub-questions concerning how the features of practices are represented and which motives are attributed to the practices have guided the study. In order to provide answers to these questions, a critical discourse analytic methodology was applied to the interview accounts of five executive search consultants on their work in executive recruitment. As a result of the analysis, answers to the research questions were framed in terms of four distinctive discourses on practices in executive search, the main characteristics of which were indicated in Table 4.

This final chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section, the findings are summarised in light of the research questions of the study and compared with previous literature. Practical implications and directions for further research are considered in the second section.

6.1 The discourses of executive search consultants on their work practices

Drawing from the characteristics of the accounts analysed in Chapter 5, it can be observed that the interviewed consultants relate to a variety of topics in elaborating on their work practices. Both distinctive features and motives of practices were extensively laid out in the identified discourses. Moreover, the discourses emerged as essentially complementary to one another, although some contradictions could also be noted.

With regards to the features of practices, ample input on the dimensions of general activities, specific knowledge and know-how, and role orientations, which were drawn from theoretical concepts on social practices (Bourdieu 2005; Reckwitz 2002), could be identified. A summary of these main features is considered in Table 5.

Table 5: Summary of discourses on the features of practices

Entrepreneurial discourse General activities were typically characterised in terms of mediation between clients and prospective candidates. Specific knowledge and know-how related to relatively general market expertise, as well as intuition in candidate evaluation. The role orientation of consultants was focused on matching clients and candidates while managing their respective preferences and expectations.
Functional discourse General activities could be noted in the utilisation of market research resources on the executive labour market. Specific knowledge and know-how pertained to specialised market expertise and structured candidate evaluation. The role orientation of consultants could be seen in realising established executive search processes in correspondence with clients' assignments.
Professional discourse General activities were concerned with maintaining a sustainable and confidential working relationship with clients and candidates. Specific knowledge and know-how was presented in critical and constructive stances on candidate evaluation. The role orientation of consultants was characterised as geared towards principled and responsible recruitment advisory.
Conceptual discourse General activities were related to theoretical reflection on topics pertinent to practices of executive search. Specific knowledge and know-how was framed in analytical distinctions and ideals in candidate evaluation. The role orientation of consultants concerned the provision of strategic input on recruitment practices.

With regards to the motives of practices, several instances on the dimensions of interests, rules, values, and concepts, which were drawn from theoretical models on rationalisation (Kalberg 1980; Weber 1922) and legitimation (Suchman 1995), could be identified in the practitioners' accounts. The main characteristics of the motives are laid out in Table 6.

Altogether, the research material comprised many insights in light of the dimensions of the features and motives of practices drawn from the analytical framework. A fairly nuanced take on executive search could consequently be gathered from the consultants' responses.

Table 6: Summary of discourses on the motives of practices

Entrepreneurial discourse Rationalisations for activities were identified in personal and social interests. Directness and tangibility of the results of activities, as well individual abilities and the motivating nature of work could be identified among personal interests. A long-term business commitment to clients was touched on with regards to social interests. Legitimation largely stemmed from the perceived practical necessity of specialisation in executive recruitment and consultants' corresponding recruitment know-how and market access.
Functional discourse Rationalisations for activities were underlined in personal and social rules. A knowledge base on specialised market research and recruitment methods was central to the personal dimension. The economic necessity of intermediaries in recruitment featured as a social rule. Legitimation was outlined in the utilitarian, normative and socio-economic contributions of executive search respectively.
Professional discourse Rationalisations for activities were found in personal and social values. A consultant's personal integrity, and the provision of an added value to clients following critical and principled advisory were prominent to these respectively. Legitimation was presented in the professionalisation of corporate management and consultants' responsibility for client companies' performance and recruitment practices.
Conceptual discourse Rationalisations for activities were identified in fundamental values in recruitment and their wider societal implications. Legitimation was conceived of in the theoretical grounding of executive search in socio-economic concepts, as well as in consultants' contribution towards creating awareness of developments and solutions in recruiting.

The discourses can be argued to be extensively complementary to one another. Similarly as in the study of Berglund & Werr (2000, 635-36) on the discourses of management consultants, the examined discourses can be seen to highlight some of "the rhetorical space of possible arguments available" to the practitioners in making sense of their work. That is, the discourses underscore the range of different ways of talking and reasoning about practices, which practitioners, as "carriers" of practices (Reckwitz 2002, 256), may draw from.

In line with the general interest of clarifying "relations of power" in CDA (Fairclough et al. 2011, 358), some points of emphasis could be suggested with regards to the discourses, which should, however, not be regarded as indicative of particular "domination". As stated in Chapter 4, this study has not strived to offer a social critique, as is generally the case in critical discourse studies, but to rather consider features and motives of executive search practices against analytical concepts in keeping with the approach suggested by Wodak (2001b, 93). As such, it could be generally observed that some of the discourses were elaborated on more than the others. Also, although the discourses primarily appeared complementary to each other, it could also be noted that there were a number of explicitly conflicting stances between them.

As a rough approximation, the functional discourse could be characterised as the one, which, at least when contemplated in the amount of input across the interview material, was elaborated on most. However, the entrepreneurial and professional discourses also received considerable attention, the latter somewhat less than the former. The conceptual discourse was touched on least frequently.

With regards to explicit tensions between the discourses, related to the features of practices, there appeared to be some schisms concerning specific knowledge and know-how in the executive search process. It could among others be noted that intuition was emphasised and reliance on a "textbook" discouraged pertaining to candidate evaluation in the entrepreneurial discourse. As such, the view on carrying out structured candidate evaluations in accordance with established "competence models" in the functional discourse, and the citation of a book by a management scholar on ideals in recruitment in the conceptual discourse largely appeared at odds with this.

Also, some disagreement could be detected regarding role orientations. Whereas the explicit search parameters provided by clients and the role of consultants as "a service provider at the end of the day" were underlined in the functional discourse, the notion of "taking the advisory role [as a consultant] seriously" in influencing the search parameters and in opposition of "creating an alibi" for staffing processes was brought forward in the professional discourse.

Concerning the motives of practices, it could be noted that the functional discourse included the view that executive search was done out of "practical reasons", largely in contrast to a "socio-economic or some other factor … helping society move forward". As such, "the impulse of the market" was emphasised. This perspective could be contrasted with the striving to "set a counterpoint [as a conservative consultancy]" in the professional discourse. Also, the notion of executive search as fulfilling a "wide-ranging social function", suggested in the conceptual discourse, appeared contradictory to it.

Although based on a local analysis, the identified discourses could be seen to comprise several points of view with a relation to the wider context of the executive search field. Several parallels with concepts in previous research on practices in executive search, as reviewed in Chapter 2, could indeed be derived from the findings. Among others, three of the identified role orientations appeared analogous with those of coordinating, mediating and legitimating recruitment processes (Khurana 2002). That is, the predominantly interpersonal activity of mediation, the research-intensive activity of coordination, and the ethical notion of legitimation could be suggested in the entrepreneurial, functional and professional discourses respectively. Also, more specific aspects, such as evaluating candidates' personal and cultural fit with clients (Coverdill & Finlay 1998), sustaining ethical criteria (Melé & Roig 1995), as well as citing concerns on talent management (Faulconbridge et al. 2009), were featured in the material.

Taken together, the findings indicate a largely similar outlook on executive search consultants' discourses as suggested in the study of Beaverstock et al. (2010). The interviewed consultants could indeed be found to elaborate more or less correspondingly to the notion of "headhunters as professionals embodying both the technical know-how needed to undertake their job as well as softer skills that guarantee customers will receive a 'professional' headhunting service" (Ibid., 837). As such, the consultants prominently touched on the specific "discursive strategies" of emphasising both practical and technical capabilities as well as professionalism. However, beyond the discourses suggested by Beaverstock et al. (2010) on "cultural-economy" professionalisation, the findings can also be seen to provide some

additional understanding on more individual motives of practices in addition to wide-ranging concerns on professional legitimation. That is, through among others noting specific interests, norms and morals related to work activities, the study has suggested the pertinence of more fine-grained meanings to practices of executive search when analysed at close range.

Finally, it should be made clear that the analysis, as summarised here, has many limitations. Firstly, and as also already mentioned in Section 4.1, the research material has been produced especially for the purpose of this analysis. It has not been "naturally occurring", but "researcher-provoked" (Silverman 2006, 201). As such, the scope and depth of the material has been contingent on the interaction in the interview context. The contents of the respondents' accounts may for instance have been more formal and deliberate in one way or another than might have been the case in consultants' discourse taking place in a more ordinary, or "natural", setting to them. Also, although I have a certified high proficiency in each of the languages involved in the interviews, the translations from German and Swedish into English will likely have altered several meanings in the excerpts.

Secondly, and relatedly, the semi-structured interview guide has entailed a focus on the specific topics of interest in the study. Moreover, the analytical framework has produced a specific categorisation of the research material. Thus, the outlined discourses are essentially analytical distinctions for establishing coherence across the respondent accounts, and for constructing a "complete" typology of the findings (Alasuutari 2001, 212-3). The individual excerpts quoted in the discourses were indeed often overlapping in the consultants' responses on given topics. Nevertheless, the interview guide and the analytical framework have enabled focusing on certain dimensions in the consultants' responses in a systematic manner.

Thirdly, as the data sample used in the analysis is very small, the findings cannot be generalised beyond the interview contexts. Instead, the detail in the respondent material has been a main interest. Thus, the analysis of the findings has aimed at studying the particular research material at "close range" (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000, 1134).

6.2 Practical implications and directions for further research

This study has examined how executive search consultants conceive of their work practices by studying the meanings attributed to them in the consultants' discourse. Altogether, the findings can be seen to offer implications for practice as well as to indicate directions for further research.

In highlighting a range of ways for making sense of the features and motives of practices in executive search, the findings can be argued to constitute specific approaches on the business. This can be seen to have practical implications in that a rather diverse set of general activities, knowledge and know-how, and role orientations related to specific rationalisation and legitimation strategies can be drawn from the analysis. The discourses relate work activities to specific priorities. As such, they entail a certain specialisation in terms of talking and thinking about practices, essentially directing more attention to some priorities over others. When noting the merits of different specialisation, executive search consultants may potentially contribute to a variety of rational and legitimate ends.

In addition to examining how executive search consultants conceive of their work practices, a further research objective of the study was stated in reviewing previous literature on practices in executive search. Based on the review, laid out in Chapter 2, it was in particular argued that the relevance of many of the analysed practices in the field for the daily work activities of practitioners have not been systematically accounted for. Instead, previous research has predominantly focused on examining general social relations and structural constraints of the executive search field at large. In doing so, practitioners themselves, and especially the ways in which they relate to their work, have only received limited attention in previous studies.

This study has largely argued for noting specific meanings, which executive search consultants give to their work practices. The analysis has thus strived to bring up the dimension of consultants' individual agency, i.e. the range of possibilities in making deliberate choices. The study has been exploratory and further research is needed to determine how executive search consultants relate to their work practices more widely.

Future analyses should be based on an extensive set of research material from the executive search field and from different levels of organisational hierarchy at executive search firms. Specific topics, such as consultants' moral principles or analytical tools in their work activities, could be examined in the analyses. Situational aspects, such as internal project meetings, client meetings, candidate interviews and candidate presentations, could moreover be studied in order to delineate the subject positions and motives of the different actors, and the uses of executive search from their respective points of view. In this way, the social significance of, and ideological tensions between, specific discourses in the field could be indicated. This would also further the understanding of the social dynamics, which executive search consultants bring to labour markets at large.

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8 Appendix

Appendix I: Interview Guide

Part 1: The interviewee

- What is your position at the company? For how long have you been in the business?
- What is your educational and professional background?
- How did you get into executive search consulting?
- What kind of assignments are you primarily involved in:
    - Hierarchical: Specialist/Middle-Management/Executive?
    - Geographical: Local/Regional/National/International/Global?
    - Functional: Commercial/Financial/Technical/Manufacturing/ Operations/HR/Sales/Marketing/Other?

Part 2: Defining executive search

- What do you do?
- What are the most important and difficult aspects of the search process?
- What makes a good headhunter? Which skills count?
- Which are the typical backgrounds of people in the business?
- Why are you doing this? Why is it important?

Part 3: The market for executive search

- For what reasons do clients externalise recruiting to executive consultants? Have these changed significantly over time?
- How do you see the structure of the market, e.g. in terms of actors and information?
- What is the position of a search consultant in professional networks? In terms of knowledge and influence?
- Where do you find candidates, or where do they find you?

Part 4: Candidates in search assignments

- How do you establish the suitability of a candidate?
- When and how does a candidate usually convince you? Particular tests or indicators of competence?
- The most important lesson learned during your career in evaluating candidates?
- What do you think is the general consensus as to the following qualities for a successful candidate:

    - Documentation (CV, photo)
    - Background (education, career, previous employer)
    - Experience (industry, firm, functional, leadership)
    - Intelligence (analytical, conceptual)
    - Skills (“soft”, “hard”)
    - Achievement (career milestones, results)

- Seniority (professionalism, age)
- Diversity (gender, culture)
- Geography (international experience, mobility)
- Language (fluency, intercultural awareness)
- Personality (intro/extrovert, sensing/intuitive, feeling/thinking, perceiving/judging)
- Charisma (authority, presenting skills)
- Appearance (style, behaviour, presentability)

- Do any properties stand out in particular in the positive or negative?
- Is there a "survival of the fitting" instead of "survival of the fittest"? How to see behind impressions and reputation?
- Which wanted properties differ significantly on a country-basis?
- Do you distinguish clear generational differences among managers?
- Would you say that the managerial profiles on the labour market have changed in recent years, and, if yes, in which way?
- Are there some particular new management trends or expectations that managers should live up to?

Part 5: Executive search in the economy

- Have executive search firms as labour market intermediaries changed the stock of executives in any way?
- How significant are the placements made at the recommendation of consultants for individual firms and the economy as a whole?
- How do you see the role of consultants for the legitimisation of corporate recruitment decisions?
- Is there cause for criticism with regards to some particular practices? In terms of efficiency or ethics?
- Is the claim that the executive search business is part-responsible for the deficiencies among corporate management in the recent economic crises justified?
- It is sometimes stated that a business gets forged in a crisis. Industry figures (e.g. AESC, BDU) indicate that the demand for executive search is highly sensitive to the state of the economy. Has this had an effect on industry practices?